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THE  
THEATRE  
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IN  
THE FIFTIES

*George Jean Nathan*

ALFRED A. KNOPF NEW YORK

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FIRST EDITION

## AUTHOR'S NOTE

THE PURPOSE of this book is not a complete record of the New York theatre in the early years of the 1950's, but rather simply a detailed impression of the over-all picture. To this end I have resorted to what seem to me the most adaptable paints on the palette, few of them of pastel shade, and have transferred them to the canvas with a broad brush. If the result here and there resembles a cartoon, the resemblance to the subject is, I think, peculiarly apt. And if, furthermore, some may complain that the findings are based upon a too insistently personal view, let them recall the late Edgar Wilson Nye's retort to a similar protest: "There are just two people entitled to refer to themselves as 'we'; one is a newspaper editor and the other is the fellow with a tapeworm."

*May 1, 1953*



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THE THEATRE  
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## THE STATE OF THE THEATRE

UNDOUBTEDLY one of the things that has injured the theatre with much of the public is the improvement it has shown in its later years. Though the critics, along with the minority of its clients, warmly welcome these changes for the better, the general trade does not seem to appreciate and relish them, and as a consequence business is not always what it used to be. Take, for example, the matter of acting. It simply is no longer ham enough, and what the public craves, though it may not be altogether conscious of the fact, is the old-time species that the critics sarcastically derogate but that the paying customers eat up with a gusto they usually reserve for its menu equivalent. Which is to say, acting in the grand old pigmeat manner, flamboyant, flourishful, booming, and on the whole suggestive of some political pitchman like Dirksen costumed by Barnum, made up by Buffalo Bill, and howling his head off in a stock-yard.

The kind of acting the trade gets nowadays, except on such rare occasions as they import an Old Vic actor in *Oedipus* or allow some native specimen like Lee J. Cobb to let nature take its course, is strictly kosher and, while the run of playgoers may pretend for appearance's sake to admire it, down in their hearts they miss something. And that something is the swollen, exciting and galvanizing sort of thing that, however absurd, rattles the chandeliers and lifts the roof off a showhouse. The trouble with acting in these years, from the public's if not from the critics' viewpoint, is that it has become less and less theatrical and more and more merely a somewhat heightened dupli-

cation of the theatregoers' own daily conduct. It is thus that the latter no longer get the thrill out of it that they got out of the exaggeratedly romantic performances of another era and see on the stage only a comparatively prosaic counterpart of the comportment and demeanor of themselves and their neighbors. The newer naturalistic and realistic drama has of course been largely to blame, but the drama's progress has not compensated them for the loss. They go to the theatre first and foremost for a show and what they usually get in its stead is a play, however good, that in their feeling lacks the added stimulation that once upon a time was derived from the bull-roars, bosom-heavings and other vagaries of ostentatious histrionism which, albeit outrageous in the eyes of connoisseurs, was part and parcel of the temple of Thespis before it was converted into a drawing-room.

The very appearance of the theatres themselves has contributed further to the trade's dissatisfaction. The average improved playhouse of today looks less like what its patrons wish a theatre to look like than like Dinty Moore's restaurant with the chairs all facing the same way. The strange and wonderful feel and smell are gone and in place of the onetime red velvet and gold and general air of something a little out of the workaday world there is the chill of whitewash, pastel drapes and accoutrements more suitable to a modern bathroom than to a haven of illusion. So it is small wonder that, until it too passed from the scene, a remaining old house like the Empire stood out fascinatingly to the playgoer from the pragmatic newer theatres and that its expansive gilt and scarlet interior, its large marble lobby and its total sense of a real playhouse invested the customer with a mood that is completely absent when he attends one or another of the modernistic funeral chapels that presently masquerade as theatres. Aside from three or four later houses there is scarcely a theatre in New York that would be identifiable as one by an old-timer if it did not

have an asbestos curtain at one end and an orangeade stand at the other.

What is needed to attract the public is a ban on the new-fangled interior decorators and designers with their ideas of "taste" that have made our theatres more suitable to medical society meetings and women's club affairs than to the adventure into mystery and fancy they once were. And with the ban a return to the tasteless but infinitely provocative boys with their gaudy brushes and pails of crimson paint. Let us have the grand old atrocities back again, the kind of playhouses we had when the theatre was in its heyday, and the boodle will duly return to the box-office. Yet when critics, both professional and lay, exert themselves to diagnose the current theatre's financial ills, they prefer to overlook such perfectly obvious things and instead devote themselves to arguments that, while superficially convincing, miss the mark. To take just one out of a dozen, consider their contention that what is wrong with the box-office is the shortage in first-rate playwrights. That the shortage exists is certainly true, but that it has kept away business is nonsense. What has kept away business is rather the shortage in second-rate playwrights possessed of the old knack of concocting plays with popular appeal, playwrights like those of another day such as Winchell Smith, Charles Klein, George Broadhurst, *et al.*, and like their subsequent counterparts in the successful manufacture of seductive mediocrity. Our present hacks, in short, simply are not skilful enough in their hackery.

The notion, on the other hand, that what the public solely craves is really creditable dramatists is hallucinative. When it is given one even like Christopher Fry it scarcely flocks to the theatre but reserves its greater enthusiasm for the F. Hugh Herberts, George Axelrods and the sort. If a Bernard Shaw exceptionally still draws at the box-office, business for Ibsen, Strindberg, O'Neill and other worthies both past and contemporary is not noticeable. Even Shakespeare, if he is not more or

less circused, does not get far. And the best that talented new American playwrights like William Inge in the case of a superior *Come Back, Little Sheba* can manage is, with luck, an even break. The mass of theatregoers, in brief, does not want real quality but, on the relatively upper level, only the imitation quality of a Tennessee Williams and, on the lower, no quality at all but rather only the idle pastime provided by the Verneuils and their *Affairs Of State* and by their co-conspirators against authentic dramatic merit.

## II

THE THEATRE, furthermore, remains one of the very few entertainment media seemingly oblivious of the fact that, to be successful in these difficult days, something extra to the main entertainment must be provided for the customers. Even baseball, our most popular box-office attraction, realizes the need for the additional fillip and busies itself devising ways to fetch the crowds. We thus at the Yankee Stadium are given, besides the games themselves, such added diversions as tennis matches, trained dog acts, egg-throwing contests, blindfold wheelbarrow races, clowns who can bat balls while standing on their heads and other sidedishes, and at Ebbet's Field the management supplements the Dodgers' performances with a freak orchestra called the Symphony. It is that way all around the leagues. To persuade people through the turnstiles, brass bands, players' "days," preliminary contests between women's ball teams, fireworks, and in Bill Veeck's St. Louis circus acrobats, zany base coaches and even a midget introduced as a member of the club have been called upon to stimulate trade.

Professional football has similarly seen the wisdom of the extra attraction and has larded games with bands led by shapely drum majorettes and with vaudeville antics on the field. Even college football, which usually has to support the schools' other sports, would not fare so well as it does without the

preliminary and between-halves undergraduate band parades with their various trick formations, let alone the comedy touches supplied by boys dressed up as animal mascots of one species or another. But the theatre persists in losing business by keeping superiorly aloof from such extra shows and, unlike the astute restaurants that gratify their customers by giving them gratis with their meals small bowls of salad, pickled beets, celery, olives, radishes and poppy-seed rolls, not only scorns the equivalent of two pairs of pants with a suit but often, as quality of plays goes, not even the one pair.

In a day when formality is rapidly disappearing from American life the theatre, in short, still adheres to a stiffness that takes its toll at the box-office. I do not mean to argue that it should cast off all its traditional restraint and make a fool of itself. All I contend is that it should unbend at least a little and so appeal more greatly to the generality of the public. If bars were permitted as they are in England, a step would be made in the right direction, but, since at the moment they are not, other means should be hit upon.\* Far be it from me even remotely to suggest that the ushers should whimsically encourage a gay mood in the customers by giving them what is vulgarly known as the hot-foot when they seat themselves or drolly drop pieces of ice down their necks, though that would not be an altogether bad idea in the hot weather. What I say is that something, whatever it may be, has to be thought of if business on the old scale is to be recaptured.

Since popcorn has saved what little is left of the movies, maybe hot dogs might do for the theatre what they have done for baseball. If tea and cakes have long assisted the pleasure of London theatregoers, why not frankfurters for ours? If cheese and liverwurst sandwiches and beer marked the heyday of the Berlin theatre, why not pull wires to permit at least the beer on the home grounds?\* Years ago the Costa Ricans built a

\* Eventually authorized, June 19, 1953

magnificent marble opera house in San José, their capital. It somehow did not do enough business and, in an effort to reduce its overdose of formality, the bookings were extended to musical comedy. Things improved, but not sufficiently. Then some masterbrain conceived the idea of passing out sandwiches to the fashionables in the boxes. In no time the former corrupting air of formality disappeared; the people in the rest of the house took the cue; and trade began to boom.

It was much the same years ago in Milan, Italy. One of the big theatres was found to be a white elephant; people simply would not go to it whatever the attraction. A new management took over and, concluding that what was lacking was the fun that lies at the core of popular theatregoing, set about rectifying matters. It did not, true enough, introduce spaghetti and chianti for the comfort and delight of the trade, but it did introduce such various Steeplechase Park delicatessen as collapsible seats, skirt-blowing air draughts and the like to entertain the patrons before the show and during the intermissions, and business progressed with leaps and bounds. (Olsen and Johnson's *Hellzapoppin'* appropriated and elaborated on the idea, with, it will be recalled, enormously successful results.)

The proportionately much greater prosperity of musical shows over dramatic hints at this yearning of the public for gayety. If the public can not get it in one form or another in the auditoriums, it settles for it on the stage. But its rush, even at the musicals, to get out of the dull auditoriums between the acts and have an enlivening drink or cigarette indicates the way it feels about things. It regards the theatre as a holiday and when it goes to the theatre, whatever the play or show, its holiday spirit remains uppermost in its constitution. Yet instead of encouraging this spirit, everything is done to minimize and depress it. You can't smoke, as in the Paris music halls; you can't audibly express your opinion of things on the

stage, as in London—if you do an usher will rush indignantly down the aisle and warn you of ejection; you can't stand up during the show, as in Madrid, and blow kisses to some fair one who has captured your roving eye. You can't, under the present auditorium blue laws, throw pennies at the stage as you could in the older days; you can't, as in Cairo, put your feet up on the back of the seat in front of you; you even can't, when the show is no good, as you can everywhere else in the civilized world, go happily to sleep, rest your head on the shoulder of the person sitting next to you, and loudly and contentedly snore without the remonstrances of the person, the adjacent seat-holders and an intrusive usher.

A moratorium, I say, on all such restrictions. And to boot, for the good of the business, maybe a four-piece brass band in the back of the house during the T. S. Eliot intermissions, peanuts and Crackerjack when Maurice Schwartz next shows up, and by all means those hot dogs on all occasions, with plenty mustard and pickle relish.

### III

THE COMMON saying that people go to the theatre to be amused is, however, usually taken to mean solely that they go to be cheered up through an appeal to their lighter and blither emotions. What seems to be overlooked is the paradoxical fact that when given the chance they just as often go to be pleasantly saddened through an appeal to their tender and more delicate feelings. This is true not only in regard to plays but even in the case of musical shows, as the great success of Rodgers and Hammerstein has proved. More handsomely than any of their colleagues they have cashed in by appreciating that nothing gratifies the trade more than being stimulatingly depressed. With the possible exception of *Oklahoma!* their most prosperous shows have invariably been on the wistful, violin-mood side, as witness *Carousel* with its gentle melan-

choly, *The King And I* with its hopeless and defeated romance, and even *South Pacific* which, aside from its introduced rough Marines humor, is cast o'er with the soft cloud of its principal love story and with the heart-touching rain of its secondary—and as witness the songs which frequently vibrate an audience's E-strings.

A general public whose taste, as indicated by the Tin Pan Alley and radio and television statistics, is and for some time now has been for so-called torch songs or their sweetly doleful equivalents and on the relatively higher levels, as indicated by the best seller lists, for books about spiritual antisepsis, the sad ocean waves and kindred moist concerns is much the same public that the theatrical producers have to woo, and it is not, obviously, a public to be gratified alone, as the majority of the gentlemen persist in believing, by overly optimistic, plum-laden drama or jelly-belly laughter, with or without frankfurters.

It has been that way for long. The so-called six-handkerchief plays that for years on end distilled fortunes for producers from theatregoers' tears may have been supplanted by those that call for a somewhat lesser supply of pocket linen, but they seem still to exercise much of their old potency. If today they are not the *Camilles*, the *Prisoner Of Zendas* with their throat-lumpy "If love were all!", and the woebegone *Madame X*'s, they are the *Death Of A Salesman*, *Glass Menageries* and *Member Of The Weddings*, at times less lachrymose but nonetheless sufficiently evocative of snifflies and noses-wipings. And even when they are not quite such amiable depressants, they are the sort that fetch the customers with what-might-have-been themes, with fragrant nostalgia, and with similar fingerings of the sentimental keyboard. The public, it appears, does not want to laugh all the time, despite so many producers' positive conviction to the contrary. It still enjoys, if not necessarily a good cry, at least the agreeably uncomfortable feeling of an occasional ocular dampness.

It is true that the trade does not always follow the reviewers, but a glance at the plays to which, since the institution of the Critics' Circle's awards, their prizes have been given shows that it usually does. And that glance also shows that the doubly endorsed plays have been not the laugh variety, not the so-called light amusement, tired businessman species, but things like *Winterset*, *Of Mice And Men*, *Picnic*, *The Time Of Your Life*, *Watch On The Rhine*, *The Patriots*, *I Am A Camera*, *All My Sons*, *A Streetcar Named Desire* and *Darkness At Noon*, along with the Miller, Williams and McCullers plays already mentioned. In other words, whatever here and there their critical quality, plays veined with some mellowness and even sorrow and some address to emotions higher than those inhabiting the midriff. And it has been the same with the foreign choices like *Shadow And Substance*, *The White Steed*, *Venus Observed*, *The Cocktail Party*, etc. Down the years *Charley's Aunt* may be a record moneymaker, but *Uncle Tom's Cabin* has not been too far behind. O'Neill has accumulated a bigger bank account than George Kaufman, and Jerome Kern left a lot more cash than the composer of "I Faw Down And Go Boom."

The word entertainment, in short, is too frequently and arbitrarily regarded by the producing mind as being synonymous, purely and simply, with fun, which in turn is regarded as being synonymous solely with laughter, which in double turn is regarded as being provokable only by the established and accepted elementals of humor. That entertainment may come equally from the higher cells of the brain and heart is looked upon as a dangerous doctrine, like Communism and an indulgence in the hair of the dog that bit you. That there may be as much entertainment in a tear as in a prattfall the producers are consequently loath to believe. If you point out to them that people do not go to the opera in the hope of laughing themselves to death and that operas like *La Bohème*, *Madame But-*

*terfly, Louise* and others that brew a bland pathos are among the biggest of the drawing-cards, they will be reluctant, or perhaps just too dumb, to admit. If you remind them that people do not flock to the ballet to burst their seams and that *Swan Lake, Les Sylphides, The Sleeping Beauty* and other such antiques continue to draw at the box-office, they will be equally backward in listening, as they will be if you remind them of such modern romantic story-ballets as *Picnic At Tintagel*. And if you suggest to them that the comic strip books are the enthusiasm of delinquent children and that the sales figures testify that adults reserve their patronage chiefly for books of a less clownish nature, they will incline their necks the other way.

So the blind continue to fish for the dollar with what they consider chucklebait and guffaw-worms and more often than not find it has got away from their hook. It may be altogether too much to say that we go to the theatre primarily to be unhappy, but it isn't too much to say that we do not go to it primarily to be hyenas. We go, many of us, to have our emotions stirred, and they can not be stirred, as so many of the producing gentry hold, only with a slapstick. They, too, have their own kind of holidays.

#### IV

PROBABLY the greatest privilege enjoyed by a commissioned dramatic critic is not having to go to the theatre during the summer. It is a comfort and delight on a par with the mint julep and not fastening the collar button of a shirt even when one is wearing a necktie. There are critics, I appreciate, who, either because their employers have no Christian consideration for them or because they are pigeons for punishment, pursue their theatregoing at home or abroad throughout the hellish season and even offer the appearance of being rather proud of

their martyrdom. There was a time, indeed, when I was one of their number and not only sacrificed my good sense and well-being to annual attendance upon the European play-houses but even to investigations of the rural theatres spread throughout the eastern seaboard of this country. But no more. I have achieved the sagacity that comes with the years as well as the regard for physical felicity and if the theatre craves my counsel it has to wait until the climate is more suitable to a human being than to a camel.

My attitude, I like to think, is much less selfish than it may seem and is really of some genuine critical service to the theatre, since if nothing more it bears in mind the theatre's most valuable attribute, which is illusion, and if anything can destroy that illusion it is such oven-baked weather as has befallen us in the recent summers. Despite the large talk of air-cooling systems that are supposed, on the rare occasions when they are in even fairish working order, to make sitting in an urban playhouse indistinguishable from reclining in a vat of gin rickeys, the fact remains that conditions backstage remain *au naturel* and the consequence is such a sweating and dripping on the part of the actors and actresses that any semblance of attractiveness is as absent from them as from an equal number of Turkish bath attendants. Even though he himself may be moderately comfortable, the playgoer is accordingly hard put to it to react properly to a hypothetically immaculate hero who perspires as copiously as a grilled tomato or to a putatively ethereal heroine who rapidly takes on the appearance of Yogi Berra at the end of a double-header.

Illusion in such cases is up against it, and so is the mood of the play in which the poor, sweat-soaked and exhausted players have to exercise themselves. The imagination may conceivably reconcile a pack of excessively humid and liquefied actors with the Siamese climate of a show like *The King And I* or with the thermometer of a *South Pacific*, but it has a difficult

job when it is requested to respond sympathetically to the characters in a play like *The Fourposter* who have apparently been sweating without letup like a pair of tropical waterfalls over a span of American years from 1890 to 1925 or to those in something like *The Moon Is Blue* who, though the play takes place in the Spring and in part on the observation tower of the Empire State Building, look as if they had just emerged from a tub of melted oleomargarine. I, for one, capriciously still respect the metropolitan theatre too much to attend it under such circumstances. And I feel the same way, for more reasons, about the rustic summer playhouses.

Even if these bucolic enterprises purveyed a much better grade of theatre than they do—the grade that most of them provide is the kind that would discourage theatregoing on the part of backward children in the urban winter—visiting them in the dog days is much like sitting around a kitchen stove with a couple of colored women under the delusion that you are in Morocco. Not only don't the small playhouses have even the dubious air-conditioning devices of the Broadway houses, but their frame structures hold the heat and intensify it, with the result that it becomes a dead race between the actors and audiences to see which will first collapse.

It is one of the most foolish articles in the American Credo that, however hot it is in the city, the countryside is bound to be cooler. When it is hot in town, it is usually just as hot in the country and anyone who does not believe it is the kind of donkey who believes that trees are instrumental in decreasing humidity, that rural open spaces induce breezes even when there aren't any, and that there is something about green grass that makes you feel cool even if you know you are so hot they could roast chestnuts on you. I have spent parts of many years in the tropics and I want to say that I have been a lot more comfortable there than in most of the cow-pasture theatres.

There may be some people who can dismiss physical discomfort and enjoy a play regardless, but I fear that I am not

one of them. I am a cool weather critic and it is not easy to entertain me when pearls of perspiration are embellishing my nose and when an over-size electric fan is blowing my hair down over my eyes and buzzing like a sawmill in the misguided notion that it is making existence divine. So put me down, if not exactly a snowball, as one who abjures the halls of Thalia in the cooking weather along, it seems, with the producers and managers who at the first symptom of 85 degrees Fahrenheit pack their bags and take off for remote parts.

Old Horace Walpole once remarked that the way to endure summer in England was to have it framed and glazed in a comfortable room. The way to endure summer in this country is to avoid the theatre and read about it in a comfortable room. There, it retains all the charm and allurement that it loses when the mercury shoots up and converts it into a greasepaint purgatory in which the spectator is made to feel like a mess of ravioli and in which the actors have to be scooped up after a performance with a mop. Fancy can not operate nor imagination function when your trousers stick to your seat, when a fat woman nearby flays your ear with the agitations of her program fan, and when humid dew sprinkles itself over your already mortified corpus.

## APPENDIX

So long, however, as there is one pretty girl left on the stage, the professional undertakers may hold up their burial of the theatre.

\* \* \*

Every now and then someone comes forth with a plan to instil an interest in the theatre in the youngsters who will constitute the audiences of the future. The plan usually takes the shape of persuading this or that management magnanimously to admit the small fry to a matinée at a trivial price. The trivial price is expedient but the trouble with the plan is that the play the youngsters are usually privileged to see is generally something that they do not cotton to and that, far from encouraging in them a love for the theatre, rather sends them back with an increased satisfaction and glee to the movies, television, radio, or playing postoffice. If the misguided planners wish really to interest fledglings in the theatre, let them cajole the managers to privilege them the gay musical shows. A *Top Banana* will make many more friends for the theatre amongst them than all the plays Shakespeare and Ibsen ever wrote.

\* \* \*

Just how television is going to discourage adult theatregoing, as some fish argue, is hard to figure out, since it devotes itself largely to plays which have already been shown in the theatre, which are stale to the theatregoer, and which are often in addition so wretchedly done that they drive him right back to

the theatre to see something decently staged and acted. Those telev viewers who are satisfied with what they see are not theatre customer material, and never were. Television will thus naturally be damaging to the motion picture box-office but, if the theatre has any sense, it will guarantee its future great prosperity by encouraging it with every means, fair or foul, at its command.

\* \* \*

Now and again there is a movement to start plays at seven o'clock in the evening instead of at eight-thirty. The idea behind it is that it will allow people to get home earlier and give them more time to enjoy a good night's rest. Whoever evolved the idea deserves a rich reward in the shape of six months' free board in the nearest lunatic asylum. In the first place, the early hour would prevent the theatregoer from having any dinner or would limit him at best to a hastily wolfed snack. This would put him in a mean mood and would further probably make him so hungry for something to eat at about the middle point in the play that he would be the worst audience imaginable. If perchance he could contain his appetite until he got home, he would then load up on food which would not only delay considerably his going to bed but, as the idea-genius has seemingly overlooked, would seriously discommode him when finally he did get to bed and render a peaceful night's rest out of the question. There is only one trouble about publishing this argument and that is that the aforesaid idea-genius may read it, agree with it and decide that, instead of starting plays at seven o'clock, it would probably be wiser to start them at five in the afternoon, which would be seemly for later dining but which would drive all and sundry so plainly crazy that, when the time for dinner came, the waiters would refuse to serve them.

\* \* \*

A large part of the success of old-time burlesque, long since suppressed by censorship in various cities, lay in the comedy aspects of the frontal protuberances of the female anatomy and of the rear protuberance of the male. A considerable share of the decline of the movies is to be attributed to glamourizing the female protuberances and to dismissing the humorous possibilities of the male protuberance in serious favor of the male visage, frequently, so far as I can see, an indeterminate choice. That neither the female nor the male protuberances seem either funny or in the slightest degree glamourous to me is probably what makes me a critic.

\* \* \*

We are currently inflicted with the spectacle of the cockiness of bald men. Several years ago, following the appearance of Ezio Pinza in *South Pacific*, the older boys, who up to then had remained dormant, gained such romantic faith in themselves that there was no holding them back, and their performances with the girls almost drove their wives out of their minds. But they were fellows who, in partial condonement of their donkeyshines, at least had some hair left on their heads. Now, however, for reasons not dissimilar, even men with domes that shine like white patent leather seem to venerate themselves as irresistible magnets and cut up with the ladies with such abandon that the taverns and night clubs, in the interests of peace and security, have been forced to instal not only extra bouncers but a copious assortment of blackjack, brass knuckles, and especially potent Mickey Finns.

It all had its beginnings when Charles Boyer, that prince of ladies' men, disdaining any cranial camouflage, showed up on the stage in *Red Gloves* with a nude head and nevertheless continued to make such a dent in the fair ones as no leading man with a mop of hair had made since 1932. It progressed when Humphrey Bogart of the films, esteemed by the girls as the epitome of romantic muscle, announced in the press that

his loss of hirsute adornment had evidently greatly increased his sexual attraction, since his fan mail, once his locks began to disappear, had increased by leaps and bounds. And it achieved a full bloom when more recently it became widely known that, though he wore a toupee on the stage, the greatest ladykiller among the present matinée idols was actually so sparsely thatched that he had to comb what was left with a demi-tasse spoon and yet was so prosperous a Lothario off the stage that he had to employ three masseurs working in shifts to keep him in available condition.

\* \* \*

Someone is always wondering why there are few more good mystery plays in the theatre. There are few more good mystery plays because they are no longer mysterious. The plays themselves, when from time to time we get them, are no better or worse than those we got years ago when the stage was full of them. It is simply that the public, along with the reviewers, has read so much mystery and detective fiction in books, magazines and Sunday newspaper supplements that it can unravel a plot before the spuriously saturnine butler even starts putting on his makeup. And a mystery play that is not mystifying is about as successful as a detective with his badge on his hat.

\* \* \*

It is argued that plays about baseball uniformly fail in the theatre because, if people want baseball, they prefer to take it out of doors. By the same token, sports writers whose comments on baseball are gobbled up and read by millions of people indoors should similarly fail and be out of jobs. Plays about baseball fail simply and only because they are poor plays. Let a really good one come along and it will succeed. The way to such success has been proved by the enthusiastic reception of good skits on the subject like Ring Lardner's *The Bull Pen* in

one of the Ziegfeld *Follies* and the sketch called *Highlights From The World Of Sports* in a recent season's *Two On The Aisle*.

\* \* \*

We continually read that this or that play can not be done because of the impossibility of casting it with available actors. We also read that several thousands of actors are out of work and eager for work. If among all those several thousands there can not be found the six or seven, or even eight or ten, necessary to the casting of most such plays, the Actors' Equity Association is culling its membership from the wrong profession and should shut up shop. But the Association is not doing any such thing; it is made up of professional actors of every degree of ability. So it must be that the producers who complain they can't cast their plays are not looking for actors but for the Hollywood imitation brand.

\* \* \*

"The theatre," asserts Elia Kazan in an interview, "is not words, it is action. A play has to get you and do this to you," illustrating his pronunciamento, according to the interviewer, by shooting out his right fist and twisting it in the air as if he were grinding a knife into an enemy's groin. What Mr. Kazan, celebrated for his directorial genius in melodramatizing marshmallows, would apparently reduce the drama to is one comprehensive old silent gangster movie. His notion that some of the words of, say, a Christopher Fry do not get you and do things to you nearly so much as Simon Legree's whip or Greasy Nose Joe's revolver is hereby awarded a dunce-cap of handsome design.

\* \* \*

The microphone has become the bane of the American entertainment world and is undoubtedly on occasion the cause of

a falling off in business, which doltish managements are given to attribute to high admission prices, taxes, the weather, and whatnot. I try always to keep an open mind, but let a singer, comedian or anyone else short of a train announcer have one in front of him and he goes down in my book as a dud. If he actually needs the microphone, I figure that he, or more often she, is not ready for public appearance and ought to take lessons in voice projection before trying to collect a salary. If the performer is properly equipped and doesn't need it, the microphone is just a fraud and as such should be got rid of. Acoustics, which are frequently the apology for the use of the things, are ninety-nine times out of a hundred perfectly all right and the instruments are simply so much extra, nonsensical baggage, like slices of lemon served with potato salad and directors of hillbilly bands.

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The surprising success of *The Fourposter*, which embarrassed many of the critics, was perhaps not altogether difficult to explain. The married portion of the public was evidently much consoled by the supposedly romantic picture of wedded life that made its own married life, however prosaic, seem twofold romantic in comparison. Also, the public was doubtless immensely gratified by a two-character play, since after its painful experience with so much of the acting in recent years the reduction of potential bad performances to merely two was an appreciated bright prospect. And its consequent astonished discovery that the performances of the two in this case were entirely satisfactory so staggered and impressed it that its word-of-mouth delight brought the money into the box-office.

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The tradition that box-office attendants are invariably impolite is groundless. They are polite enough. The only trouble

with them is that their politeness is a cover-up for most of the tickets having been allotted to the speculators.

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The fact about many play revivals is that, far from reviving the plays, they rather make them mortally ill.

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It is one of the idiosyncrasies of the serious theatre that it regards the harlot after two hard and fast rules. Either she is an instrument for the spiritual and physical annihilation of man or one for his spiritual and physical redemption. It seldom recognizes a middle ground. Thus, one comes to the conclusion that in the more temperate and dispassionate approach of comedy is to be found the best proof that our comedies are often our best serious plays.

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French farce is based largely on the box-office theory that it is awfully funny to be caught in another man's wife's bedroom.

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Strange is the persistent actor and actress habit of smearing blue shade above and under the eyes in the belief that it will counteract the stage lighting and give the orbs a normal, natural look. Far from doing any such thing it usually gives them the appearance of being afflicted with gangrene. Similarly odd is the apparent belief of the producers of the musical show, *Wish You Were Here*, that a prolonged spectacle of nude males is attractive and even charming. Not only didn't they philosophically profit from the reaction to *Out Of This World*, which believed the same thing, but they further do not seem to recall Bismarck's "I have even seen three emperors in their nakedness and the sight was not inspiring." If we have to have nudity on the stage, let us confine it to the girls.

Strange, too, is the continued use of the word "authority" in laudatory critical conjunction with an actor and his performance. Analyze it and it becomes meaningless as to an actor's competences. No critic would think of employing it, for example, in the case of even the best actor in the world giving one of his best performances as Charley's Aunt. When they say an actor has authority, what the critics generally mean is only that his role itself has authority and that he plays it with proper respect for its importance, if not necessarily with any histrionic attributes much beyond the physical heft suitable to it, a stern masculine speaking voice, and a wig, preferably streaked with gray, that looks sufficiently natural. It also seems strange that the classic *Lysistrata*, when revived, is seldom if ever cast appropriately with young or at least comparatively young actors and actresses but mostly with male and female players far advanced in years. The consequence is that an audience feels the warriors have not been deprived of sex by their anti-war womenfolk so much as that both have been deprived of it by time and nature. And stranger than anything else is the later day common belief of producers that the only way a female singer can put across a song is to act as if she had swallowed a rivet factory and to comport herself while singing as if she were training for the Olympic games. Their idea that, if the vocalist restrains her impulse to crack the plaster off the walls, the audience will fall asleep must come as a severe blow to all those lovely women on the world's stages who down the long years have captured the hearts of theatregoers through their conviction that there is perhaps more melody in a violin than in a steam drill.

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The beauties of the countryside take a beating when compared with the stage. Is there anything in outdoor New York or New Jersey to match the loveliness of the scene in *Swan Lake* or *Les Sylphides*? Does anything in Vermont, Massachu-

setts or Pennsylvania equal the charm of the woodland in a recent season's production of *As You Like It*? Besides, you can delight your eyes sitting at ease in a soft, comfortable theatre chair instead of being assaulted by fleas, spiders and mosquitoes and having your shoes outraged by manure. Unpack your bags, dupes, and stay in town.

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One of the serious defects of the little summer theatres is that most of them are not theatres but counterfeits that resemble theatres only in the degree that a barn or some other such structure with chairs distributed about it resembles the Comédie Française. The theatre atmosphere is entirely absent and when you go to one of them, even if you are dressed to the nose, you somehow feel as if you were wearing overalls.

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Another trouble with the rural playhouses is that, whenever a character in a play alludes to the wonderful peace and quiet of his surroundings, it is pretty certain the automobiles on the road will choose that exact moment to toot their horns like crazy or a number of urchins in the yard outside will let go with piercing screams and reverberating hollers.

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Shaw's *Misalliance*, which has long been considered unplayable, or at least risky to try to play, was revived by the City Center company and of course proved to be so handsomely playable and such a success that it was moved to Broadway, where it delighted still more of the people who somehow had never heard that Shaw's *Don Juan In Hell* sequence from *Man And Superman* was also unplayable. It begins to look, indeed, as if it would not be a bad idea to stop playing the playable plays, which so often bore the life out of an audience, and start playing the various unplayable ones that might enchant it. I

do not, of course, mean *King Lear*, which even some of the highest authorities have insisted is unactable but which has been acted to the sufficient satisfaction of audiences here and abroad for years, but rather such other worthy plays as have been sleeping on the library shelves because no producer has bothered to wake them up and put them on their way. *Mis-alliance*, though admittedly one of its author's lesser works, has proved itself to have more wit, more humor, more fun and more vivacity, here encouraged by the deft direction of Cyril Ritchard, than nine-tenths of the plays the current theatre wastes its and its customers money on. It was one of the few joys of its season, and it only again goes to show that, to paraphrase the words of a character in another dramatist's work which Shaw professed to consider inferior to his own, there are probably more good things in playwright's trunks and drawers than are dreamt of in our producers' philosophy.

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More so than any other Europeans, the Irish have the knack of fashioning the essentially farcical into comedy. It is not that they abstain from considerable physical action; it is that they have it come naturally and honestly out of their materials rather than arbitrarily dumping it into them. The essential difference between farce and comedy may perhaps be partly defined in this way: farce is a form of drama in which the characters are presumably more amusing chasing their posteriors hither and thither than, as in comedy, employing them for the cushions nature and civilization intended. The French farcical stage thus frequently resembles nothing so much as a treadmill on which in the interests of a theoretical humor the characters disport themselves like lubricous kangaroos; the German, while less hysterical, a platform on which the movement is considered to be electric in the degree that the characters comport themselves with an unnatural and strained personal discomfort; and the English a place where the only

character even dimly recognizable as faintly normal is the gardener who periodically pops into the proceedings to inquire what's wrong with all the other characters. The Irish, alone, at least on most occasions, seem to be gifted in identifying farce with the human race, certainly nothing to be otherwise described as news. The popular box-office accordingly resents the implication.

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The awards business has lately been carried to such an extreme in the theatre that about the only people who last season did not get plaques, medals, scrolls or chicken dinners were the one or two who actually deserved them. Following the lead of the Pulitzer board and the Critics' Circle, all kinds of groups and individuals of all shapes, forms and colors have constituted themselves dispensers of so-called honors, with the result that it probably will not be long now before any actor who can pronounce the word "hooey" correctly or any playwright who includes in his play something socially significant like saying that if you do not vote you can not expect your candidate to win will get at least one laurel from some women's lunch club, somebody who can afford a cocktail party at the Algonquin, or some other such public posturer, plural or singular. Exactly how many of these self-ordained arbiters are presently in operation, I can not say, as I tired after counting up to ninety-seven. But they are functioning all over town and beyond, and they have succeeded in making the wholesale prize-giving so meaningless and silly that any beneficiary of one of their awards, if he has an ounce of dignity and sense, is bound to feel as embarrassed as if a street-corner hobo had approached him and handed him a dime for a cup of coffee, except, of course, that the dime would be worth more than the award.

All this, of course, is not to say that the Pulitzer and Critics' Circle prizes, of which the others are an imitation, are gener-

ally anything for their recipients to strut about. The Pulitzer awards, as almost everyone knows, usually do not signify anything, save perhaps that many of the members of the unwieldy committee that finally bestows them have not seen the plays to which they give them. Some years, indeed, the award is withheld, which probably only means that nobody on the committee had time to get around to seeing any play at all. Certainly there can be no value whatsoever to an award that, in the past, has voted rubbish like *The Old Maid* the dramatic masterpiece of its year; that was given to a play like *Hell-Bent Fer Heaven* simply because its author was a close friend of the committee member who had the most influence; and that was thrust upon William Saroyan in one year despite his contemptuous rejection of it as worthless. Everyone must further look askance at an award committee that has at one time or another contained at least a couple of members who have declared to their friends, of whom I have been one, that, if they go to the theatre at all, they prefer girl shows and do not care any more about serious drama than they do about the musical compositions of Ian Pieterszoon Sweelinck or fried halibut.

Though the Critics' Circle surely is not anywhere near so bad, it nevertheless at times has displayed itself in an almost equally ridiculous light. It is not giving away any secret to report, for example, that at times it has had a suspicious tendency to favor a play with a topical message over a better one that has offered only superior imagination and writing, artistic honesty, and substantial dramatic worth. On at least two occasions it has thus given its prize to inferior plays simply because they reflected the popular indignations of the moment. Nor is it giving away any secret, at least to those who can read between the lines of the Circle's choices, to report that it seems to be prejudiced in favor of a new writer of promising talent against an established one of already recognized talent. This propelled its members so far that, as will be remembered,

they gave their award to the newcomer Arthur Miller's *All My Sons* as being a better play than Eugene O'Neill's immensely worthier *The Iceman Cometh*. There are occasions, in truth, when it seems that the Critics' Circle adopts the old Pulitzer standard of merit, though if one accused the members of any such thing they would become pretty indignant. Nevertheless, several of their awards, whether deliberately or not, have followed the original Pulitzer injunction as to "good morals" and other such critical irrelevancies.

In view of the over-all situation, I come forth with a constructive suggestion. I propose that a new group composed of the more competent and experienced drama critics, along with some acknowledged and respected authorities on the allied theatrical arts, be organized forthwith. I further propose that this group convene in early May of each year and decide which play is factually the most deserving of the year, which musical show is really the best, and, if it wishes to go farther, which actor and which actress merit top standings. When the decisions have finally been arrived at, I additionally propose that the group, first, swear on the Bible not to reveal them to anyone, and, secondly, that they then spend the money usually wasted on scrolls, etc., on drinks for themselves. The plan obviously enjoys several advantages, even overlooking the drinks. In the first place, considerable public curiosity would be aroused as to the identity of the privately honored theatrical figures and, not knowing who they were, nobody could complain, as almost everybody does in the present circumstances. In the second place, the playwrights, composers and actors who currently get awards from other sources and seldom deserve them would be certain in their vanity that the projected group in its unquestioned wisdom had voted for them, and, since no one could possibly know differently, would be even more idiotically happy in the delusion that they had been the honored ones. And, in the third place, we would be

spared the printed publicity about the awards which presently in other directions makes us all a little sick.

But, though surely it is the most intelligent idea offered in years, I fear it will not be acted upon, and for a reason that should be apparent. The reason is that, though they would be the first to deny it, the members of the group, like all the other committees, circles, clubs and individuals who constitute themselves awarders of awards, would doubtless be just as eager for publicity as the candidates for the awards. They would want to bask in the limelight that would be thrown on them as judges of merit and as dispensers of prizes, and they would be distressed as the devil if they were deprived of the opportunity to pose as big shots. So maybe I shall have to think up another idea.

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There are men, so I have heard, who are not interested in an actress' good-looks. They are the same who admire plays done without scenery and played on a bare stage. I am not addressing them. I am rather speaking for those who do not become indignant at the sight of a pretty girl and who do not believe the fact that she is pretty inevitably argues that she can not be much of an actress. And the present scarcity of such blooms must remind them, as it does me, of Kin Hubbard's lament, "We now have 7,000 beauty preparations, or about 889 for each beauty."

"Nature," pontificated the late Professor William Lyon Phelps, "makes girls lovely to look upon so they can be tolerated until they acquire some sense." If the Professor had got around more, he would have learned that loveliness is not necessarily a token of imbecility, a belief encouraged by the kind of men who subscribe to movie magazines. But, even were they right, who demands sense in a lovely girl? I'll answer the question, and it will not cost you a penny. Those who

demand sense in beautiful, singing poetry, in the emotional thrill of beautiful music, in a tasty and fragrant dish of Irish stew. To the pots with them!

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"For an actress to be a success," says Ethel Barrymore, "she must have the face of a Venus, the brains of a Minerva, the grace of Terpsichore, the memory of a Macaulay, the figure of Juno, and the hide of a rhinoceros."

If the charming Miss Barrymore will forgive an old friend and admirer, that is the richest dab of nonsense that has been spoken since Jean Cocteau last opened his mouth. It is quite possible that, to be a success, an actress has to have the memory of a Macaulay and the hide of a rhinoceros, but the belief that Bernhardt had the face of a Venus and Duse the brains of a Minerva or that Edith Evans has the grace of Terpsichore and Helen Hayes the figure of Juno is, if Miss Barrymore will take a moment to reflect, absurd. An actress, in short, no more needs the face of a Venus to succeed than she needs a knowledge of scientific aerodynamics, but it helps. It helps a lot, since it serves as a very effective introduction before even she begins to spread what talents she has. And, as I have said, there has lately been a paucity of such magnetic introductions, which more usually have had the tone of "Shake mitts with the girl-friend."

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It is a well-known fact that an audience always applauds an empty stage scene when the curtain goes up on a play and always applauds a star actor or actress on his or her first entrance and before the star has had an opportunity to open his or her mouth. This is undoubtedly because of the audience's obvious, great desire to be able to applaud something or other when it goes to the theatre and because it wants to get the

applause in as quickly as possible on the principle that during the rest of the evening it may not be afforded another chance.

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When we reflect upon the rapidly declining *soi-disant* American National Theatre and Academy and its late gesture as a producing unit in its acquired Guild Theatre, we are reminded of the story of a certain European project several years before the first World War. A small town in the southern part of Germany was seized with a sudden attack of culture and arrived at the conclusion that what would most magnificently promote its æsthetic estate was a theatre, not just an ordinary theatre but something special that would, it was hoped, represent not only the little municipality but the countryside for miles around. It was decided to call the project the Weisnicht Municipal and Territorial Theatre, and presently the citizenry worked itself into a lather to raise the necessary funds through a long series of benefit luncheons, picnics, banquets, balls, and whatnot. When finally enough money was in to begin work on the building of the theatre, the promoters went about the business of hiring a director from Berlin who had been out of a job for years and the director in turn went about the business of finding plays that would properly serve the dream-house. And, when the latter was finally ready to open, he also was ready with his chosen repertory which, after a year of trial, proved to be so stale a lot of revivals and so feeble a lot of new scripts that the citizenry gave up in despair and, without sufficient funds to go any farther with the project, called a meeting and voted to convert the theatre into an elaborate comfort station.

As a comfort station it was a huge success and it has endured as such until this very day.

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Though I have been going to the theatre professionally for almost half a century, I have yet to hear an American youngster in an American middle-class play pronounce certain words as most such youngsters invariably do. Playwrights who do not remember their own childhood insist rather upon having them speak with more or less literary exactness, as if they were Old Vic actors in embryo. I hope that I shall live long enough to see the day when a kid will come out realistically with sassa-prilla, cranberry, punkin, carmel, celry, lickrish, marshmellow, choclut, cinnumun, skyrockit, oringe, meducin, Chrismuss, vaniller, and all the other lovely short-pants locutions.

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There was a time, not very long ago as the clock flies, when the European theatre was so dominated by stage directors bent upon large reputations for themselves that dramatists both classic and modern were treated by them simply as raw material for their self-ordained Roman holidays. It was the period when Stanislavski, Tairov, Meierhold and Nemirovich-Danchenko in Russia, Reinhardt, Jessner and Piscator in Germany, and Copeau and Pitoëff in France, operating relentlessly, if now and again with imagination, dexterity and exterior brilliance, viewed their playwrights as second fiddles at best and themselves not only as directors of the minor instruments but as autocratic baton swingers over everybody else in the theatrical orchestra, including actors, scene designers, electricians, costumers and, of course in especial particular, press-agents. It was not that their sovereignty, save often in the instance of the dramatists, wasn't largely justified; it was rather that the stages over which they presided frequently became mere picnic grounds for their personal pleasure and for the promotion of their own estate at the expense of the dramatists in question, who frequently were converted into monkeys put through circus paces at the whip cracks of their ring.

masters, all of them in self-bought dazzling outfits and all of them at the finish of the act taking all the bows.

Now that death or critical education has removed most of these self-glorifying operators from the European theatrical scene and has again allowed some independent shine to the once suppressed artists in dramatic composition, there is evidence that the bacillus has crept overseas and that, though at present not too disquietingly infectious, our American theatre is beginning nonetheless to develop some troubling symptoms. We are engaging, in short, premonitory signs of the pox that, if critical physicianship does not take heed, may bring nearer the day when our theatre will become a directors' theatre and when our playwrights, as O'Neill once found in an earlier year in the case of his *Dynamo* and thenceforth would not permit any play of his to be done unless he were present to safeguard it, will cease to be themselves in their own right and become little more than the tools and toys of egotistical self and box-office masseurs.

No disparagement of the box-office as such is intended. The box-office is obviously as vital to the stability of the theatre as are the audiences that it represents. But there are different ways of serving it and one way not to serve it, at least honorably, is to showmanship a reputable playwright out of his repute in the interests of a director's reputation for "success" and of his self-esteem and personal advertisement. The playwright, however now and again effective the drawing-power of players, is in the long run after all the box-office's first and last hope and, if he is adulterated by directorial popinjays in the business of arbitrarily metamorphosing him into a popular show, the box-office despite its consequent momentary prosperity is certain ultimately to suffer. Toscanini does not by way of appealing to the masses conduct Beethoven in terms of Sousa, yet that is the manner and stratagem of at least two of our directors with the dramatists, albeit scarcely Beethovens, who have come under their wands. We thus in recent seasons

have seen a playwright considerably gifted in the simple picturing of simple people inserted by his director into a gaudy frame more suitable to Wedekind and *Earth Spirit*. We have thus seen another whose talent, such as it is, is for something bordering on lyrical depiction of character given the full brass treatment for the purpose of melodramatizing the possibly too delicate into wide audience acceptance. And we have thus witnessed even an estimable effort in the shape of American opera so tortured into constant, swift action on the theory that it should be made palatable as well to devotees of *Shuffle Along* and the Rockettes that there were times when one was misled into thinking it had been composed by Robert Alton in collaboration with Asadata Dafora and Charlie Caldwell. Nor has that been all. Regular theatregoers have indeed so frequently observed self-important directors producing themselves rather than the playwrights they were supposed to produce that in order to get any real idea of the playwrights' work they have had to bide their time until the plays were published.

We read every now and then that this or that playwright has been brought to protest during rehearsals at what one or another of the species of directors in point has done to his play. But the protest does not seem to have been lasting, since it is a rare man, as our playwrights go these days, who can not reconcile himself to a director's determination to make his play a box-office hit, even at the price of what authentic merit it may originally have had. And that is precisely the danger of the whole thing. Human nature and the desire for material success are most often bound to take their toll of honor, and the potential artist is influenced to gamble on the promise of financial gain rather than on mere critical esteem and kudos, which, say what you will against him, do not buy groceries, or, if he happens already to be in funds, that extra Cadillac that the American heart is so set upon. And so, as sure as God made little apples and the Devil big ones, the playwright be-

gins to share his director's cheap-fame-with-money appetite, sticks his pride into his pocket, and another promising talent has gone down the chute to quick dollars and Broadway glory. There is not, nor has there been, a single American dramatist of any genuine worth who has had to depend upon a director to develop that worth. Directors have on occasion helped to sell the worth to the public, just as other directors have now and again helped worthless playwrights to sell their lack of worth. But it is this business of magisterial directors posturing as creative geniuses over the bodies of already creative dramatists that, if it is not put an end to, will make of our stage what similar European directors made much of the stage of Europe: a circus at the expense of an art.

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If it has accomplished nothing more, the recent revival of the 1937 John Murray-Allen Boretz farce, *Room Service*, though it is very far from a notable example of the species, has served to remind us that farce, once one of the prides of the American stage, has in these later years fallen on desolate ways, that new, deserving specimens of it have long been strikingly absent, and that as a consequence one of the biggest attractions of our theatre in other times is no more. The Hoyts and Du Souchets of the distant past, the Gillettes, Mayos and Cohans of a subsequent era, and the Watkinses, Hechts, MacArthurs, Kaufmans, *et al.*, of the years that followed have had no worthy successors, if indeed any at all, and farce, so far as our contemporary stage goes, has seemingly become a forgotten thing.

It is not altogether difficult to figure out why. Even in France, long the particular hothouse of farce, the change has been observable. The newer playwrights, both there and here, appear to think it is *infra dignitatem* and that, if they wish to exercise their humors, somewhat more refined comedy will be better for their positions and reputations. (As a mark of the

prejudice, it may be noted that even this *Room Service*, originally billed as a farce, has now been christened a comedy.) What we accordingly often get these days are so-called comedies that to all intents and purposes are essentially farces but that posture as something theoretically a little loftier by tampering the movement, inserting leisurely polysyllabic words into the dialogue in place of the former crackling monosyllables, and engaging politer actors.

There is perhaps another reason. Our younger playwrights are by and large a more seriously inclined lot than their counterparts used to be. World conditions, ideologies, politics and other such concerns occupy their attention in much greater degree than ever they did in the past and the situation is reflected in their dramatic efforts. Even, indeed, when they venture into comedy there is frequently evidence of their graver interests and disquiet. But, whatever may be the reason or reasons, the fact of farce's decline is unmistakable. There has not been a single new, worthy exhibit of the kind in at least fifteen years; the few we have had in that period have been the work of rank novices dedicated to the films, radio or television, novices trying to get a foothold in the theatre by any means whatsoever, and have been hopelessly nondescript. Far from being farces even in superficial designation, they have been simply cheap, fraudulent comedies rapidly directed and shouted.

It seems strange that what Aristophanes did not consider beneath him should be considered beneath their talents by our present playwrights.

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What may be called the reading-theatre, which got its start with the performance by the First Drama Quartette of *Don Juan In Hell* and has since delivered itself nationally of such a profusion of solo and group copycats that seeing a play with

a drop curtain, some scenery and costumes will, if things keep up, conceivably one day be a novel and exciting experience, has now given us a reader-actor demonstration of Stephen Vincent Benét's lengthy historical poem, *John Brown's Body*. The officiating group in this case is composed of Raymond Massey, Judith Anderson and Tyrone Power, is augmented by a choral assemblage of twenty, all of robust lung, and is assisted by the customary microphones. The occasion, despite the nobility of its ambition and purpose is, after the first half hour of it, a trial.

It is that for a variety of reasons. Though Charles Laughton has arranged and directed it with much of the skill he indicated in the Shaw exhibit, the materials with which he has to deal defeat his best efforts. That there is drama in Benét's poem is granted, but since it has not been dramatized for the stage all one gets from the reading of it amounts to little more than what one gets from a second-hand, extended recitation of the plot and dialogue of some play one hasn't seen. The Shaw presentation was a delight, quite apart from its capital reader-actors, because it was never seriously meant to be drama of any kind, because all it aimed at was a picnic of wit and humor, and because it did not need or demand that extra quality of theatricalism needed by and demanded of emotional as distinct from purely intellectual drama. Throughout the present evening, on the contrary, there is always the feeling that a "play" is missing and that what is being offered in its stead is an apology for something that should be but is not there.

It is one thing, in brief, to be lightly entertained by several actors *in propria persona*; it is quite another to be deeply moved by them. And the moving in this instance, even in the case of many who have reacted to Benét's work in the library, is at a minimum, save now and again when the singers, relevantly and legitimately enough, stir up things with echoes of the marching songs and tunes of the Civil War period and when Abe Lincoln is put through his customary sure-fire paces.

If the presentation had preceded the First Drama Quartette's, it is probable that its novelty might at least in some measure have surprised the general audience into a tickled acceptance of it. But, with repetition, the business of several players in evening dress operating on a bare stage before several microphones has lost much of its interest, and the sense of loss is here heightened by forcing each of them successively to read entirely different roles with scarcely more distinguishing characterizations than changes of voice and facial expression. Since, moreover, the long poem, which involves not only the Abolitionist Brown's story and the Civil War events preceding and following it but also the secondary stories of the lives and loves of fictitious Yankee and Rebel figures, has not been dramatized in the technical theatrical sense, the whole thing lacks any directness and clarity and frequently becomes difficult to follow in its ramifications. And the difficulty is accentuated by a second difficulty in determining just what characters the players are portraying. I have just as expansive an imagination as the next man, but when one minute I am asked to regard an actor as one character and the next as another and totally different one simply on the score that he makes a different kind of face and alters somewhat the pitch of his voice, I confess I find myself pretty much bewildered. I am perfectly willing to swallow some such vaudeville costume-changing protean performer as Owen McGivney as not only two or three characters in *Oliver Twist* but even as seven or eight, yet it is beyond my range of fancy to visualize an actor in a dinner suit as everything from Lincoln to a Negro slave and whatnot else merely on the ground that a narrator announces he is one or the other.

If the present players were the equal of those who served the Drama Quartette, things might possibly be a bit more satisfactory, but they are not. Even Judith Anderson, that usually excellent actress, is not at all happy in her current assignment. Thrust before an audience with nothing more to

assist her resources than an evening gown, a microphone and a smear of light that would discourage a Broadway haberdashery, she seems embarrassed out of herself and substitutes a repertory of roguish smiles, irrelevant drawing-room gestures and artificial vocal shadings that sometimes throw the meaning of her lines into the shadows for what in normal dramatic circumstances she would be the full mistress of. Raymond Massey accommodates himself better to the hybrid occasion, though he, too, often has a time of it with the script's confused urgencies and, while his vocal delivery is nicely varied, is driven to such distortions of his features to indicate his various incarnations that he intermittently suggests a man in pain rather than the possibly less afflicted character he hopes he is portraying. Tyrone Power, the screen beauty who is the third of the starred trio, has an admirably clear speaking voice and first-rate diction, but has not yet learned much about modulations and becomes monotonous as the evening goes on.

In conclusion, it may be guessed that, with this presentation, the local prosperity of the reading-theatre has just about run its short course. The novelty it had is gone and, unless another group as fully competent and engaging as the Drama Quartette miraculously comes up out of nowhere and unless another great wit like Shaw comes up with it, the theatre as we have always had it will be found in its old, secure place.

## AMERICAN PLAYWRIGHTS, OLD AND NEW

*Maxwell Anderson*

It is a wise mortal who reconciles his ambitions to his limitations. Said Thoreau: "The boy gathers materials for a temple, and then when he is thirty concludes to build a woodshed." Maxwell Anderson is a happy and enviable exception. At the age of sixty-five he continues to gather the materials for temples and, though he converts them into woodsheds, firmly and contentfully persuades himself that the woodsheds are edifices of an unusual majesty and beauty. The most recent example of his self-soothing imagination is a play about Socrates called *Barefoot In Athens*. The reference to woodsheds, however, is not altogether invidious. I use it comparatively. Woodsheds, though scarcely cathedrals, serve their ends, humble though they be and, when painted up, do not always look too bad, except perhaps to architectural connoisseurs and other intrusive analysts, and Mr. Anderson is such an expert at the painting job that it appears he occasionally manages to deceive even some of them. His present handiwork, nonetheless, is one of his lesser performances with the paint-pot and the bare contours of the woodshed seem to be visible even to those of his critics who in the past have been inclined to mistake them for the outlines of an imposing house of worship.

What Mr. Anderson has attempted is a picture of the Greek philosopher caught in the ideational turbulence consequent upon the Spartan conquest of Athens that led to the trial for his championship of free inquiry, regarded as subversive by

the political leaders of the time. Like various other contemporary playwrights in other directions, the author seems to have been enormously pleased by his surprised discovery that the situation contained parallels with the situation today and his treatment of the theme duly exhibits his relish of the detection. He is apparently forgetful of the fact that almost all history is fruity with modern parallels and that it has become child's-play dramatically to resort to them. His cullings from the lore of Socrates to argue his plea for freedom of thought and discussion are, furthermore, largely and indiscriminately in the vein of tricky and superficial paradox and lend the famous philosopher the appearance of a mere, minor Chesterton. Of the size of Socrates he suggests nothing, and all we get is a serio-comic crayon portrait of a gray-bearded and somnambulistic fifth century Monty Woolley clad in an amplitudinous peignoir and mouthing benign sentiments on the right of man to express himself in a democratic society. It is and has been Mr. Anderson's misfortune to challenge us to expect too much of him. Were he more modest in his aims, we should probably take him, for better or worse, as we find him. But when he aspires to the Shakespearean line or, as on this occasion, to the sort of figure that Shaw made his own satirical province, he places himself in the uncomfortable position of one scribbling on statues, and no higher than their feet.

The play, in addition, suffers from the languor and torpidity inherent in the spectacle of meditative speculation opposed only intermittently by actors directed to shout their contradictory views. Of conflict in the dramatic sense there is a minimum; even the conflict of philosophies and ideas seems lifeless, since their orchestration in vivid language is lacking and what might conceivably have been stirring becomes only a tired debate. Nor were matters helped by the acting and direction. Solely in the instance of George Mathews as the Spartan king who wishes to be addressed as Stupid was there any sugges-

tion of how things might have been handled. Barry Jones' Socrates, though Jones has hitherto established himself as an able actor, was little more than an orthodox figure out of the commercial religious drama and needed only a somewhat sharper white spotlight in the trial scene to pass muster for the character of Manson in *The Servant In The House* or, indeed, and not to stretch the point altogether extravagantly, for that of the martyred Christian maiden Lygia in the Wilson Barrett type of lion-pit drama. The rest, excepting only Daniel Reed's Crito, were run-of-the-mill actors in the toga-drama tradition, given to the routine sinister mumblings and outraged yells. The direction by Alan Anderson was, of course, partly to blame. When it was not the kind that usually accompanies the productions of *Julius Caesar* by college dramatic societies it was of the prevalent species that somehow imagines a *missa solemnis* tempo lends weight to a script. The result was an exhibit that, when not painfully poky, resembled the substitutes on a football team hanging idly around the clubhouse waiting for the assistant coach to show up.

### *Elmer Rice*

ELMER RICE'S *The Grand Tour* is about a prim New England schoolmarm who has long dreamed of a trip to Europe, inherits some money, and eventually makes it; but, though the schoolmarm does a heap of traveling, the play stands still. The scenery duly moves from New York and the Atlantic to Paris, from Chartres and Montreux to Rome, yet so far as any dramatic action goes the whole thing stays put in the wings of the stage. In an effort to coax it out, the teacher and the young man who enchants her fancy talk themselves into a state of exhaustion with European guide-book clichés, with heavy humors about boulevard comfort stations, the nudity in the *Folies*

*Bergère* and other such senile topics, and with the shudderful thought of having an affair in the same hotel room that once served a previous love affair. But I'm afraid it doesn't work.

My fear is increased by several other things, if by any chance more were necessary. It is perfectly sound for Mr. Rice to draw his schoolteacher character in terms of the travel clichès noted—she would naturally be that sort—but it is bad theatre for the reason that any cliché-given character, unless it be a minor low comedy one, becomes obvious before long to an audience in an unintended way and tires its patience. After the teacher for an hour and a half has ecstatically uttered the established platitudes about the beauties of the Chartres cathedral, Paris in the moonlight, the snow atop the Alps, etc., all accompanied by classroom quotations from the poets and history books, the auditors are to be forgiven for wishing she had remained in her native Bridgeport.

There is also Mr. Rice's apparent belief that merely talking about poetic subjects itself constitutes a kind of poetry. The language in which his heroine talks about them, however, is so stock, prosaic and dry that what poetry may be implicit in them is converted into a Cook's tourist doggerel. And his further seeming conviction that he has written an appealingly simple play about a simple love story—something in the vein, say, of Claude Anét's novel, *Ariane*, or Lee Pape's short story, *Little Girl*, both excellent—is equally faulty. True, he begins simply and not unpromisingly but gradually so complicates his performance with the stuffs of poor, past plays that one feels his heroine has traveled all over Europe only to arrive at the hackneyed situation of the wife and other woman confronting each other. The play, in short, is less simple than simple-minded. What is more, when it leaves off the business of rapturous sight-seeing, which has the wayward air of a Nellie Bly in bobby-sox writing picture postcards to a moron uncle back home, it can think of nothing better and fresher in the way of

drama than to have the heroine's idyllic lover at length confess that he is an embezzler, and nothing better and fresher in the way of other characters than the shipboard tipsy good-fellow in a colored paper hat and the wife who, though she has said she was through with the hero, returns to stand by him in his hour of need.

When, two seasons ago, the critics properly belabored Mr. Rice's *Not For Children*, dreadful claptrap, and it promptly failed, he was reported to be wrathfully convinced that they were not only ignoramuses but were for one reason or another prejudiced against him. Now that their reception of his newest play has been no more hospitable, he will probably be doubly convinced. While I can not speak for my colleagues, I can speak for this particular ignoramus, and I confide to Mr. Rice that he is perfectly right. I am for one reason or another prejudiced against him, at least lately. The one reason is *Not For Children*. And the another one is *The Grand Tour*. But otherwise there is nothing wrong with me or, I venture, with the other ignoramuses that he can not cure with a respectable play.

Beatrice Straight and Richard Derr had the leading roles in the travelogue talkie. Miss Straight managed the earlier portion of the evening nicely but thereafter hit a single note so unrelievedly that she compounded with monotony the monotony of the script. Derr, on the other hand, devoted himself so resolutely to what either he or Mr. Rice, who directed him, venerates as the restrained type of acting that he did not act at all and offered instead all the attributes of a highly starched shirt save only its lustre.

*John van Druten*

AMONG all those currently operating as playwrights for the American stage probably not more than four or five at most can manipulate the English language with any noticeable skill. An appreciable number of them can construct plays that seem to be satisfactory to most theatre-goers, but few are able to write them to the satisfaction of those with more particular ears. They are gifted in the kind of dialogue that passes muster for "alive" dramatic writing, the kind that crackles like a jittery telegraph wire and is as economical as if it were written for bargain basement sale, but they are paupers when it comes to anything more literate and anything that even moderately resembles literary expression. They are, in brief, those who seem to believe that the spoken word and the written word are arbitrarily miles apart and as necessarily dissimilar and even antagonistic as cats and dogs.

It is, however, no new thing. It has always been so in American dramatic writing, which at that and with all its remaining deficiencies nevertheless indicates a considerable improvement over what it was in the now distant past. In that past, the appearance on the scene of even some such man as William Vaughn Moody, a second-rate writer at best, was so startling a phenomenon that the overwhelmed critics of the period were deceived into regarding him as a striking genius. The reaction, however, was not surprising, since to the left and right of him swarmed a horde of Broadhursts, Kleins, Walters and Thomases who, though expert in the carpenter work of dramaturgy, wrote largely in the pulp language that served the stage of the time as keen dramatic dialogue. Now and again, true, a writer of more quality would make an appearance, but his aptitude for the drama was nil and as a consequence he only added to the popular theory that literature and drama were

inevitably very remote cousins, and scarcely on speaking terms.

John van Druten again proves in his *I Am A Camera* that he is not only the possessor of a lambent pen but at the same time one of the few such who is skilled in dramaturgy. His play, adapted from the stories of Christopher Isherwood and drawing the picture of an amoral English girl in Berlin directly previous to the rise of Hitler, together with the miscellaneous people who touch her life, is one of the not many endorsable dramatic experiments in the more recent years, and provides a humorous criticism of those reviewers who have seen fit to deprecate it because it departs from the very kind of playwriting they profess to deplore. Seeming throwbacks to champions of the old well-made play, they have lodged against it all manner of defects which in fact are its especial virtues—"inconclusiveness," "underdevelopment" and suchlike which are of its logical essence—and have made themselves a little ridiculous. Only bad drama is perfectly conclusive; only drama that wrings dry the negligible is fully developed. Van Druten simply records life in its constant flow and evanescence; he leaves an arbitrary final curtain to self-confident hacks.

When these reviewers lament that van Druten's theme and treatment are undeveloped they forget the plain fact that absence of development is properly inherent in his plan and that any conventional development of it would be both illogical and senseless. And when they fret that the play is inconclusive they do not seem to be aware that inconclusiveness is just what van Druten had in mind. The play's immediate action is perfectly conclusive; what is inconclusive is only his characters' future. By the reviewers' definition, accordingly, three-fourths of the finest modern drama would also and similarly be inconclusive. If such criticism keeps up, they will have only themselves to blame for the curbing of reputable playwriting and for their pains will be rewarded with a continuance of the tidy slush which they at the same time profess to gag at.

In characterization, intelligent observation of life, and above all in the matter of literate writing, the play is definitely superior stuff, at least in comparison with most current drama. Only in the hokum handling of its free-spending, rah-rah American character and in the equally hokum soapbox rhetoric on the subject of racial persecution does it fall from critical grace. Otherwise, it is an honestly managed and remarkably effective job. The effectiveness was heightened by the acting, to say nothing of by the playwright's own direction of his work. Standing out was Julie Harris' admirable portrayal of the sex-loose heroine, a real achievement; and not to be dismissed were the performances of William Prince as her Isherwood friend in need and of Marian Winters as the doomed to be hounded daughter of a rich non-Aryan merchant.

The talented author's most recent play, *I've Got Sixpence*, is, however, another matter. It displays him in a mystical mood that beclouds his erstwhile lyrical pen and finds him searching blindly not only for the spiritual values of his thematic intention but even more vainly for a sufficiently accommodating dramatic way to express the search. As a consequence we get a play that consists almost entirely of vague conversational duets culminating, rather desperately it seems, in a grease-paint happy ending involving the business of a lover who has abandoned his woman when he learns that she is to be the mother of an unwanted baby but who is drawn back to her by love and who, to resolve with some large pains the playwright's thesis, lays his action to the instrumentality of God.

The theme of bewildered humanity's ultimate salvation through religious faith appears to be beyond van Druten's reach and the fact is no better to be argued than in this showshop coda. The gropings of his characters for the meaning and purpose of life are less their own despair than that of their playwright, who expresses his inquiry not alone incoherently but platitudinously and who mistakes incoherence for man's confusion and platitudes for his relevant and persuasive state-

ment of it. When he concerns himself with such worldly matters as amorous seduction, he as heretofore is at his likeliest and best; there is no one writing for the theatre who can make such scenes truer and more illustrative of factual human conduct; but when he takes off from earthly considerations and attempts to fly into the region of metaphysics he becomes so inextricably entangled in his wings that he resembles a dead butterfly more than the visionary bird of splendid color he hopes we will accept him to be.

The devices with which he seeks to purvey his message are here and there as theatrically dubious as the manner of the message itself. The tree, symbolic of life, which the girl apostrophizes in the earlier portions of the play and which at the end bursts into flower with a spotlight thrown on it, is surely right out of the first chapter in the handbook of stage hokum. The characters' alternately wistful and stern gazings into space to indicate wonderment, incertitude, soul-stirring and everything else short of counting the house are out of the same chapter, as is the despairing girl's careful preparation of a sleeping pill mixture for suicide, sudden resolve to go on with life, and melodramatic disposal of the glass containing the poison. The woman of obdurate dreams opposed to the woman of sheer pragmatism is another patent lift from the book, and so is the blind, gentle old lady who can see, as the expression is, with her heart. All and more are again in operation, covered o'er with a frosting of religious candy. It does not become the van Druten of our past regard.

Viveca Lindfors was drafted from the films to play the girl and Edmond O'Brien from the same quarter to play her man. Neither did much to inject any credence into the evening. Miss Lindfors attitudinized throughout most of the play in such a manner as to suggest she had not fully made up her mind whether she was on a dramatic stage or still on a movie set and, in addition, was bothered by an accent that made

many of her lines unintelligible. But she had a good, slim, sexy figure and had evidently studiously consulted dressmakers as to the best means to display it, emphatically. O'Brien acted from first to last in one key and that a fractious monotone. Paul Lipson was amusing as the evangelist of some vague cult worshiping what he called the All-Effulgent; Vicki Cummings gave one of her standard performances of the usual sophisticated female character; and Patricia Collinge adorably blinked her eyes, played little tunes with her voice and lovingly decorated her countenance with tender smiles after her familiar Pollyanna pattern in the role of the benevolent old lady. Boris Aronson's fluid settings served the unfluid script. Please, Mr. van Druten, forsake religion and prayer, go back to your former atheism and again adorn the stage with your comedy writing which makes converts to life of us all.

### *Lillian Hellman*

THE REVIVAL of Lillian Hellman's *The Children's Hour* has again reminded us that when adroitly treated, whether seriously or humorously, gossip and its handmaiden scandal combine to remain one of the most completely fascinating themes in the dramatic catalogue. Ever since the earliest years of the seventeenth century when Shakespeare sent Iago about his baleful whispering business, audiences have indiscriminately and gleefully cocked their ears at slander and innuendo as well as at the other forms of tattle, to the profit of the box-office and their eccentric palates. Goldoni with his eighteenth century *Women's Gossip* followed a short while after by Sheridan with his *The School For Scandal*, Echegaray with his *El Gran Galeoto* (*The World And His Wife* in the later local adaptation) in the nineteenth, Lady Gregory with her *Spreading The News* in the early years of the twentieth, and various other playwrights over the long span have had themselves a

time and have in turn given their clientele one with the subject. And whether it has been handled solemnly or whimsically it seems never to have failed in wrapping up the trade's interest.

Just how successful Miss Hellman's play will prove on its reproduction, we can not at the moment of writing tell, but its great success when it was first shown eighteen years ago is a matter of record and attested again to the seemingly indomitable power over an audience of dramatic scandalmongery in whatever key. Even theme aside, it still deserves a repetition of its prosperity on the score of its considerable merit as a piece of playmaking and as a tight and intelligent melodrama, let alone its uncommonly deft triumph over materials that in less gifted hands might easily have been productive only of a cheap showshop sensationalism. It is what Miss Hellmann deliberately has not done that lends some size to what, were it tastelessly done to a turn, would have been largely sub-Brieux or the kind of thing with which Al Woods used to scare the very three-sheets off the billboards. Restraint, in a word, has been Miss Hellman's best critical weapon, and her play, which as almost everyone by now knows deals with malicious gossip that accuses two women of an unnatural relationship and brings in its wake the wreck of their personal and professional lives, not only retains all the suspensive drive it initially had but is, to boot, better by far than most of the plays of native origin that the stage has lately offered.

If there was a weakness in the revival, it lay in the casting of at least one of the leading roles and in certain points of the author's own stage direction. Though Kim Hunter was valuable as one of the victims of the child's malice, Patricia Neal's physical aspect with its wayward suggestion of manly facets rebelliously planted at the outset and so enfeebled what should gradually come out later; and the direction instead of minimizing the obvious only further accentuated it. Robert Pastene,

who had the role of the doctor affianced to the Hunter character, was in addition either a poor actor or had been directed into so namby-pamby a figure that what strength there is in the written character evaporated and converted it into a kind of Pinero Cayley Drummle crossed with O'Neill's "dear old Charlie" of *Strange Interlude*, the consequence being that one felt the fiancée might understandably be forgiven the dereliction of which she is accused.

Iris Mann's malevolent youngster was a performance nearly as satisfactory as her memorable one in *The Innocents*. If, as some were heard to object, she (encouraged by the author's direction) comported herself with such an undeviating rancor that she should readily have been recognized by the other characters for exactly what she was, I think the interpretation of the role was at least partly justified by the case the playwright has built up for her. What was forgotten by the complainants was that there is a certain warrant for the child's suspicions in the later confession of one of her victims and that what begins as seemingly pure venom is subsequently in some measure explained away by the victim's self-doubts. There was, in other words, plan to the over-all pattern rather than, as in the instance of the performances of not too dissimilar roles in plays like *Guest In The House*, etc., an arbitrary adherence to villainess routine. The direction, as noted, was here perceptive.

There has always been one element in the otherwise cunningly written play that has bothered me. It is the business of having the child whisper her accusations of perversion against the two school mistresses into her grandmother's ear because, she insists, she can not bring herself to speak them aloud. Why can't she? Everything in her character would not only allow her to speak them openly but would indeed gratify her in the proclaiming of them. It is not the child that is hesitant about articulating them; it is the playwright who evidently has

qualms about putting them into words and who shrinks from possible censorship (*vide The Captive*). Miss Hellman has cheated. And the result is that each time I have seen the evasive business I have not been able to put out of mind the familiar act in the old musical shows wherein the comedian makes up to a woman, bashfully hems and haws his purpose, is impatiently bidden by her to tell her what's cooking, proceeds to whisper at length into her ear, and is presently given a resounding whack on the cheek, the impact of which so unbalances him that he loses his trousers.

### *Paul Osborn*

If handled with any appreciable skill, the play with which an audience can identify itself is pretty certain to cash in rather handsomely at the box-office, and Paul Osborn's *Point Of No Return*, based on the Marquand best-selling novel, is just such a ticket. Most of the plays in any season touch no closer upon the lives and emotions of the trade than so many Chinese dramas and, though some of them may be casually entertaining, vanish from recollection soon after their final curtains drop and thus leave nothing for the audience to talk about. The valuable word-of-mouth is consequently nonexistent and the plays have to depend for their popular chances on some possibly magnetic star, some element in them that may accidentally capture the public's fancy, or some other such gamble.

Osborn's job, which has been contrived with a calculation worthy of an expert double-entry bookkeeper, deals, as readers of the novel will recall, with the American passion for success, both monetary and social, and accordingly makes it convivial for average theatregoers to see much of themselves in its chief characters: the husband and father eager for advance-

ment and the not less eager wife and mother. And to guarantee that their satisfaction and dreams will be completely fulfilled, the novel's ending has been doctored up to make everything come out with a gaudy happiness. It is gold-mine stock but, since this is not the financial department of a newspaper, we pass over that phase of the exhibit and pursue the critical business for which, we optimistically presume, we are read. Pursuing it, we find the play, which was proficiently directed and staged and which in greater part was admirably acted, to be without any distinction whatsoever and, in truth, on the whole a little fatiguing. The scenes showing the home life of the climbers and the problems that beset them are not bad. But the middle portion of the play, which occupies itself with the return of the hero to his old home-town and concerns itself with the springs of his worldly ambition—and which seems endless—not only has all the dulness of the so-called dream sequences of the paltry fantasies that years ago used to impress the critics as very imaginative indeed, but in addition so interrupts the flow of the play's main current that it has the appearance of an olio. The writing, moreover, is generally commonplace, and the invention negligible. The play, in brief, is compounded, and in terms of experienced workmanship, of the guileful stuffs of the showshop rather than of those of reputable drama. It is a reversion to the theatre of the early years of the century staged in the advanced manner of today, a combination that is a doubled assurance of its popular success. It is in this respect like the fetching wedding dress on a plastic dummy in a Fifth Avenue shop-window; it unquestionably fascinates the hurried attention of passers-by, but the nature of the dummy hits the eye of anyone who pauses for a close look.

The success theme has served the theatre for many years and, when handled by dramatists of some quality, has resulted in drama of some quality: plays, for example, as various as

Sowerby's *Rutherford And Son*, Barrie's *The Twelve-Pound Look*, Mirabeau's *Business Is Business*, etc. Such plays, far from being mere cake-icing on the theme, have dug into it and chopped it into its constituent crumbs, not all of them by any means pleasantly tasty. They have not, as in this *Point Of No Return*, contented themselves simply in baking a commercial piece of pastry and thus establishing themselves and their sponsors as examples of the very kind of success fanatics and money worshipers which the play itself criticizes.

It is true that the play makes a fleeting show of depreciating what is miscellaneous called success and pretends to look doubtfully on it as what Paul Eldridge once described as a golden chamberpot worn with pompous dignity. But, for all its pretence, its belief in mere success runs through it and colors it as rosily as it does its audience. Its hero for a moment at its very end may have a qualm or two, weakly and hesitantly expressed, but except for that moment neither he nor his ambitious wife—nor, for that matter, most of the other characters—does or thinks anything closer to the human soul than the nearest bank. And so close in turn is it all geared to the sympathy of a paying audience that, if perchance a few in the theatre are of a somewhat more spiritual fibre, they must feel so out of place and key as to agree with Mark Twain that "All you need in this life is ignorance and confidence, and then success is sure."

A wealth of labor and talent went into making the play what *Variety* calls a "sock." Nothing was spared, save only a pride in the position of the American theatre and a selfless interest in its progress toward a worthwhile and respectable institution. A fortune was spent on scenery, costumes, lights and whatnot to lend the exhibit an aspect of the size it has not got and to persuade the customers that they were in the presence of Something Important. And, since we are speaking of success, the hocus-pocus was successful. It even fooled most of the

critics, who are paid not to be fooled. The acting, as intimated, beautifully assisted the delusion. Henry Fonda played the hero with a conviction that he could not have exceeded had the role been Macbeth, and Leora Dana did for his wife all she might have done for Macbeth's Lady. Others who were perfectly fitted to their parts were Bartlett Robinson, Frank Conroy, Robert Ross, who was particularly good, Madeleine Clive, and a young newcomer, Patricia Smith. Everything, in short, was tip-top, from the settings by Jo Mielziner to the direction by H. C. Potter and Elia Kazan, from the costumes of Mainbocher and the draperies and upholstery by I. Weiss and Sons to the historical wallpaper by Carlhian of Paris, Inc., and the sound effects of a railway train by Sound Associates, Inc. Everything, as I say, was tip-top. And you could have it.

### *Clifford Odets*

THE REVIVAL by the absurdly self-christened American National Theatre and Academy, or ANTA as it is briefly known, of *Golden Boy* must have given considerable pause to those critics who for years have mesmerized themselves into the belief that Clifford Odets is a playwright of truly remarkable gifts and one seriously to be considered as a force in the field of American dramatic writing. That he has talent is plain but, as this specimen of his work like most of the others before and since clearly indicates, it is for the purely commercial drama rather than for anything of loftier stature. The circumstance that his particular brand of commercial drama is better than a lot of the prescriptive box-office goods has caused his admirers to confuse the relative values with actual values and, to paraphrase O'Casey's line in *Red Roses For Me*, to see in the glitter of his shilling drama the shape of a new dramatic world.

I do not dismiss what abilities Odets possesses but rather specify and define their limited nature. He is an expert hand at the superficialities of melodrama and can ignite them with the kind of abbreviated verbal communication esteemed by people who, now that the telegraph company allows fifteen words in a telegram in place of the former ten, will have to go back to school if they are to take advantage of the bargain. He can impress with his characterizations those who mistake a periodic sharp and illuminating flash for the completely rounded thing. And he exercises that rigid dramatic economy which so greatly appeals to theatregoers who are firm in their conviction that much of Shakespeare needs cutting, that Shaw is altogether too garrulous, and that Christopher Fry would be much better if his plays were edited by the *Reader's Digest*. He has, in short, an undeniable facility in these directions. But what he has not is the imagination, the understanding, the knowledge, the depth and the literary blaze that in combination go to make a dramatist of any real standing and one to pass muster with any criticism above that which mistakes the lights of Broadway for the torch of shining dramatic art.

It entertains an older critic to reflect on another playwright, in various respects fundamentally like Odets, who was similarly belaureled by the critics some forty years ago and who, as Odets in due time is probably doomed to be, is now wholly forgotten. His name was Edward Sheldon. Except for an abstinence from the soapbox which occasionally intoxicates Odets he had the same love of melodrama for mere melodrama's sake, the same knack for aggressive, if not quite so terse, dialogue, the same appetite for lurid character, and the same recourse to the topical. Such brief excursions into the prettily romantic drama as *Romance* aside, the representative body of his writing had all the surface virtues of Odets' and all the deeper shortcomings. But the critics of the period, as later with Odets, saw only the flashy virtues and, in their ex-

citement over them, elevated him to a high and mighty position among American writers for the stage. To read the reviews of his work today is to invite laughter. For what he was, and what time has proved him to be, was simply another efficient box-office merchant, much more adept than some of the others of his day but nothing approaching to greater repute.

ANTA gave the Odets job a generally satisfactory presentation with a company headed by the late John Garfield, temporarily at liberty from Hollywood. But it was hard to determine the purpose and merit of including any such play in a repertory supposedly consecrated to the production of the best and finest in native drama. With it, ANTA's producing dream sank deeper into oblivion.

### S. N. Behrman

THOUGH I have not read the Maugham story from which S. N. Behrman has derived the comedy, *Jane*, I have a feeling that most of the virtues of the play are to be credited to the playwright and several of its flat notes to its source. These latter are the aged theme of the female frump who develops with the aid of a fashionable couturier into a creature of supreme poise and elegance, along with her triumph in London society on the score that she is always forthright and on all occasions speaks the truth, and the insistent overemphasis of what is habitually described by reviewers as a civilized point of view. If, in the first place, any person were to be invariably truthful in an English or any other smart circle he, and more particularly she, far from being considered captivating would be kicked out of the house even before the canapés were served; and, secondly, what is called a civilized point of view, in this dramatic case as in so many others, is civilized chiefly in the embellishment by a good tailor of instruments of insult, of

disdain for the sounder and more comfortable conventions, and of what is essentially only a smooth boorishness.

The play's virtues lie in a grade of humor and wit that, regardless of any such inquiry into fallacy and ethics, provides the material for a lot of irresistible chuckles, in Behrman's recapture of his early literary grace which in later years seemed to have deserted him, and in a suavity of tone that gives to the whole an ingratiating whimsicality. (Maugham perhaps deserves credit for some of the inspiration in two of these directions; I can't say definitely since, as I have noted, I do not know his story; I judge things simply from his record.) That Behrman has visible difficulty after the half-way mark with his plot, as a number of the critics have complained, is perfectly true; he doesn't seem to know what to do or where to proceed once its initial notion is stated and exhausted. But, though that is grantedly a defect, I do not think it too much matters so far as entertainment goes. Some of the most enjoyable plays in the annals of the theatre have been equally faulty in that quarter, and some of the classics have equally impaired plotting and plots themselves even more disarrayed and sillier. Behrman, on the lower level, has successfully tossed the imperfections into the lap of a polished language that has lulled them to critical sleep.

It remains a persistent interest in plot for plot's sake that debilitates so much of modern drama criticism. Plots are the pleasure of adolescent minds, minds that are still at the tell-me-a-story-papa age and that revel in such theatrical fare as primitive melodrama couched in polysyllables, modernized Pinero with soapboxes supplanting tea tables, and the tidy carpentry in general that has a beginning, middle and end as mechanically planned and executed as a two dollar table-d'hôte dinner. And thus it has come about that, for all their pleas for an advanced drama and for a drama of some freshness and vitality, the critical gentry with a few notable exceptions has looked askance at the tonic, invigorating and

breeze-swept untidiness of such imaginations as the later O'Casey, the young Saroyan, the van Druten of a play like *I Am A Camera* and, among others, of a playwright like this present Behrman who appreciates that the harmony of feeling and the melody of words provide a dramatic music infinitely superior to the question of who murdered Roger Ackroyd or how Cinderella Ginsbergh manages to win away the Earl of Kippersham from the snobbish Duchess of Wurst.

Cyril Ritchard directed the play with a fine shrewdness and it was proficiently acted by Edna Best in the title role and Howard St. John as the newspaper tycoon whom she eventually achieves, against his will, as a mate. Several of the others, too, were trained into the picture, among them Basil Rathbone as a sardonic Maugham semi-narrator ("Most people mistake skepticism for cynicism") and Philip Friend as the young pusher whom Jane has earlier considered as a husband. Irene Browne, however, seemed to be acting four or five dissimilar roles in the single one of the distraught London hostess; and a young screen actress, Adrienne Corri, performed the ingénue role as if she were still in her dressing-room enchantedly admiring herself in the mirror.

### *Mary Chase*

WHEN I tell you that Mary Chase's fantasy *Mrs. McThing* is cutely designated as "a play for children of all ages," you know from past experience more or less what to expect. You know, in short, that what you will be up against will be a dose of Grade-B Barrie playwriting addressed to the fallacies (1) that children are primarily interested in plays about children; (2) that adults in their second-childhood constitute an especially lovable lot; and (3) that both are to be tenderly entertained and even entranced by mush provided only it be treated whimsically. What is supposed to be imagination in such cases is

often rather only eccentric dramaturgy, and what is supposed to be endearing is a substitution of loads of sugar for a good pinch of salt. A successful fantasy like *Peter Pan* is not compounded after any such formula; it is written with a view to the trace of adulthood that sprouts in children and to the trace of childhood that lingers in adults. And the success of such things as the circus, toy electric trains and music boxes is based on the same smart perception.

I notice that many of the reviewers seem to believe that Mrs. Chase demonstrated a rare gift for fantasy in her excellently amusing *Harvey*. But *Harvey*, if they will trouble themselves to analyze it, was not fantasy but farce with merely an infiltration of fantasy. The writing of pure fantasy is a different and more difficult business, and this *Mrs. McThing*, for all the swoony testimonials of a number of the colleagues, seems to indicate that Mrs. Chase is, at least not yet, up to it. It is not that she hasn't a degree of humorous fancy, nor is it that her story plan of a witch's exchange of a prissy little boy for a normal little roughneck, with his mother's eventual realization that the latter rather than the refined automaton is infinitely the more desirable, isn't thoroughly serviceable. Nor, further, is it that she does not show periodic flashes of comic invention and moonstruck inspiration. She does. But where her play bogs down is in her inability to sustain what Christopher Fry in his fashion would describe as the mood of illogical logic or what less literally might be called the mood of nonsensical sense. Such a mood is imperative to the critical prosperity of fantasy; without it the result is only a strained silliness. To be paradoxically convincing, fantasy has to be unconvincingly plausible. It has to steal away one's sense of rationality and put satisfactorily in its place a persuasive irrationality, and Mrs. Chase manages the trick only intermittently. No sooner does she establish the desirable mood than her fantasy gets out of hand and the mood curls up like a suddenly snapped violin string. And the melody

dies until she desperately looks about her and finds another string to attach to her fiddle.

Reviewers, however, if not always audiences, seem to have a way of giving in to these excursions into fantasy and of embracing intention in lieu of accomplishment. They magnanimously accept the plan for the structure and the premise for the achievement, and it is not too hard to understand why. Confronted so regularly by playwrights completely devoid of imagination, they snatch eagerly at any who indicate even the faintest signs of it, like starving men at a crust of bread and, not unnaturally, convince themselves that the crust is a juicy pie, with raisins. That, I believe, is their reaction in the case of this play. I should like nothing better than to be able to hoodwink myself along with them, since even a thimbleful of fancy is welcome in our presently so arid theatre. But I do not seem to be able to get myself to do it. I find much of this *Mrs. McThing* a kite that soars into the air only by virtue of the fact that Mrs. Chase hides on the rooftop and pulls it aloft with a concealed wire. The kite has some bright and attractive colors but that is not enough; it needs more tail, and more lyrical wind.

Helen Hayes acted the role of the perplexed mother with all her established aptitude. It was a first-rate performance the only possible fault in which was that excess of gesture which players sometimes deem necessary to fantasy. It was thus that she, otherwise admirable, accompanied or supplemented any phrase like "far, far off" with an elaborate arm movement into space suggestive of nothing so much as a cop trying to clear up snarled traffic crossed with a histrionic football official signaling a fifteen-yard penalty. Brandon de Wilde had the dual role of the good-bad boy and brought it off fairly well, but a child named Lydia Reed completely outshone him with a beautifully innocent and wholly cajoling performance of the witch's little daughter. Enid Markey was amusing as always in the part of

a snooping neighbor; Jules Munshin bellowed so loudly as a comic-strip gangster that it was occasionally hard to make out whether he thought he was in a play or a train wreck; and Irwin Corey played an assistant gangster as if he missed being still in *Flahooley* which afforded him even more acrobatic opportunities.

It is, in conclusion, an old and stale dodge of critics who want to avoid going into extended detail as to why a full-length play proves feeble and tedious to say of it that it would have been much better if confined to one act. To repeat any such observation in this instance is accordingly offensive to my sensitivities. But just the same I swallow my pride and repeat it, categorically.

Mrs. Chase's more recent *Bernardine* is no play for any too resolute drama critic to see. He would be sorely annoyed by it, since almost everything about it is wrong from the academic point of view and violates what he has been taught to esteem by the rule books. He would shudder over its disorganized technical aspects, its fragmentary, hop-skip-and-jump nature, its seeming lack of any direct plan, and its general air of incompleteness. By all the scholarly injunctions it simply would not do and duty would compel him learnedly to put down his findings for the education and benefit of his readers, ninety-nine out of a hundred of whom, if perchance in these days he had so sizeable a number, which is doubtful, wouldn't give a damn. This isn't strictly to say that the poor fellow would not be right. The play in truth is just what he would determine it to be. But the disturbing thing about it, the horrifying thing about it, is that, for all the matters decidedly wrong with it, it provides a very enjoyable theatre evening and not only a very enjoyable one but one that is frequently touching and even charming and that makes the business of considered criticism seem as gratuitous in its particular case as it would be in that of colored paper party hats or individual preferences in dogs.

What Mrs. Chase has set herself to do, though the form in which she has done it is so indiscriminate in its use of fantasy and realism that one often gets in the way of the other and is a bit confusing, is a contemplation of the bewildered sexual impulses of adolescence, or in other words what Booth Tarkington might conceivably have done in the instance of Willie Baxter and his friends in *Seventeen* if he had been born in Bloomington, Indiana, where Dr. Kinsey comes from, instead of in Indianapolis. The subject, of course, has long been a favorite of playwrights and has been variously treated as tragedy, as in Wedekind's *The Awakening Of Spring*, as sentimental comedy, as in Vajda's *Fata Morgana* and O'Neill's *Ah, Wilderness!*, as farce-comedy in Birabeau's *Dame Nature* and Taylor's *The Happy Time*, and as a mixture of most of them in other plays both domestic and foreign.

In many of these exhibits, particularly the comedy species, the perplexed youth, sometimes with a show of bravado, sometimes with a tender wistfulness and frequently with a touch of both, finds some education at the expense of his emotional pains at the hands of an older, sophisticated and smilingly understanding woman. And Mrs. Chase again has recourse to her, as she has to such other become-standard ingredients as the boy's obtuse mother, his equally groping young associates, the girl-next-door of his own age whose conventionality he superiorly disdains but who ultimately reduces him to her own comfortable pattern, and the rest of the familiar items. But the playwright brings to the whole so gentle a comprehension, so deft a humor and so fresh a pen that it seems to sing a new song and suspends what would otherwise be an impatient theatrical memory.

The brightness of her viewpoint is reflected, among other things, in her suggestion that it is not parents but the seemingly objectionable members of a boy's gang who have a real understanding of adolescent problems, in her identification of amorous dream and fact, and in her simultaneous sly criticism of

and warm sympathy for youth's infections. Her play may technically be a poor play but I, for one, wish we might have many more such poor ones and fewer of the hypothetically good ones that are not one-tenth so warmly acceptable.

If this seems a peculiar thing to write for a hired member of the profession of dramatic criticism, let him point to another playwright whose work has suffered the strictures of the critical scholars and that nonetheless has been equally refreshing, to wit, Saroyan. He has on occasion written plays, *The Beautiful People* and *Love's Old, Sweet Song* are a pair of examples, that have offended the pundits just as this play of Mrs. Chase's has, but they have been delightful plays all the same, and they linger affectionately in the recollection much longer than plays academically more satisfying, and they have come into a dry theatre like Springtime rain and watered it into a new greenness and pretty flower. Give us, as I say, more such defective plays, since, again to quote Maugham, perfection can at times be very trying and, to quote Nathan, a long stretch of it, even were we miraculously to get it, would be as uncomfortable as life with a severely beautiful, all-wise and ever precise woman. Everything else being equal, defects can be very desirable and lovable.

Guthrie McClintic had an understandably difficult time directing Mrs. Chase's work into anything resembling a smoothly flowing stream, inasmuch as its jerky composition and sudden, puzzling changes in mood present something of a problem in staging. That, accordingly, he did not entirely succeed was to be anticipated. But it might properly have been expected of him that he would at least direct some of the boys in the youthful gang with a more natural appreciation of the species and not constitute them the artificial kind he did. Johnny Stewart's Wormy, the central figure of Mrs. Chase's scrutiny, was, however, a wholly refreshing creation, never for a moment false, and genuinely, whether in speech, pantomime or physical com-

portment, recognizable; and John Kerr as the gang's kingpin was also exceptionally good. Though Beverly Lawrence was helpful as the older woman in Wormy's love life, the other female adults were of an Equity-minimum aspect and flavor. And the stage settings by John Robert Lloyd were more notable for their economy than for any contribution to scenic art.

### *Moss Hart*

Moss HART's dramatization of Edgar Mittelhölzer's novel, *Shadows Move Among Them*, retitled *The Climate Of Eden*, brings the central character of Ugo Betti's *The Gambler* out of Italy and into the jungle of British Guiana, along with his full cargo of psychopathic aches and alarms. As in the earlier play, he is tormented by the recollection of a savagely hated wife, in this case not murdered through his apparent connivance but the victim of an accidental death that interrupts his own plans for slaughter. And also as in the Italian play he is brought finally to a realization that he himself was really the guilty one in his marriage relations and that the wife he detested was undeserving of his contumely. The character in the Betti incarnation was introduced to God and through Him learned the value of mercy and grace; now he is introduced to a missionary instrument of God and through him comes to learn the same thing. Though a less tortuous play than the Italian's, Mr. Hart's is still too complicated for comfort and is at its comparative best when he leaves off his involved excursions into Freud, Adler, Stekel and other such sleuths of the psyche and allows the story of the missionary and his family to enjoy its more placid course.

In this latter regard the play offers some ingratiating facets

and there is pleasure in a contemplation of the missionary's philosophy of evasion and illusion in contrast to hypothetical civilization's determination in pursuing everything to a pragmatic conclusion. The uninhibited life of the jungle colony as opposed to the morality and conduct of the cities, winningly argued and defended, provides the materials for considerable whimsical charm. But the melodramatic introduction into this gentle atmosphere of the tormented psycho, which the playwright doubtless prized as a remarkably fetching idea, particularly in respect to dramatic catalysis, jars the exhibit out of itself and gives it the effect of being not a single play but two different ones operating at one and the same time. The consequence is puzzlement and mad disorder.

The production, expertly maneuvered by Mr. Hart, was, however, save in one or two particulars, creditable. The setting of the missionary's double-deck house and adjoining church with its background of jungle palms and the lighting by Jean Rosenthal were above reproach; and the performances of Penelope Munday as the missionary's youngster daughter with an eye clapped lubricously on the psychotic intruder into the jungle Eden and of Rosemary Harris as her elder sister who finally persuades him out of his agonies were excellent. The rest, including Isobel Elsom as the missionary's wholesome wife and, though he seemed to be uncertain of some of his lines, John Cromwell as the preacher of the beautiful life, were also properly in the picture. But the fly, nay the crow, in the ointment was the actor chosen to play the occasion's Strindberg, his name, at least so the program soberly insisted, Montague. This Montague, a salami recruited from a movie lot where they were filming something called *Moulin Rouge* and selected and imported by Mr. Hart and his producers after what a program note confided to us—and coincidentally alarmed us—was "an exhaustive series of auditions," provided the misguided Hart's exhibit with the kind of performance that I had thought had

disappeared from the theatre forever with the passing of Thomas Shea, whose brand of acting was *Dr. Jekyll And Mr. Hyde* whether the play of the evening was that or anything else. The import's apparent idea of portraying a man suffering from the diseases of the mind was to indicate that his brain was situated at the base of his spinal column and that its tortures so paralyzed it that he could move about only in so rigid a posture that its acute discomfort communicated itself to his features, which in turn were caused to form themselves into the frozen and forbidding pattern of a death mask of Bugsy Siegel made by an Eskimo. It was something wonderful to behold, even if it made a mockery of those portions of the play in which its entrepreneur functioned.

### George S. Kaufman

GEORGE S. KAUFMAN'S *Fancy Meeting You Again*, in which his wife, Leueen MacGrath had a hand, deals with reincarnation, a subject that in one form or another was very appetizing to audiences in the early years of the present century. It was in that period that plays like *The Road To Yesterday*, written by a pair of elderly New England ladies who apparently believed quite seriously in it, and like *When Knights Were Bold*, written by a Britisher who believed it was just a lot of gumbo that would cash in at the box-office, attracted the impartial favor of our theatregoers. For the next two decades, however, the topic was forgotten until a believer who owned several million dollars' worth of oil wells in Texas thought it high time that it again be treated devoutly and concocted something called *The Ladder*, which remains in history as the damnedest rubbish of its or any other era.

The exhibits of the genre, whether tolerable or awful, com-

mitted themselves in a general way to two plots. In one, advocated by the believers, it was argued that what you are in the present life is a reflection of what you were in previous incarnations and that if, for example, you have a long aquiline nose and are of a somewhat bellicose disposition you were once a Roman warrior under Caesar and before that in all likelihood an elephant. In the other, manufactured by those concerned only with an easy dollar, a comedian who jumped with fright every time the cuckoo-clock went off was involved in a sudden shift of scenery which disclosed him in a far past embodiment as a ludicrous knight in armor who, just as he was about to rescue the maiden fair from a murderous band of Turks, was scared into a dead faint by the screech of a hoot-owl.

Beginning with the late Thirties, reincarnation was discarded by playwrights as being altogether too rococo and idiotic and, preening themselves on their superior wisdom, they went in for what they were pleased to regard as scientific or psychiatric explanations of the delusion. Thus, instead of showing that their characters were something other than their contemporaries in remote years, they attributed everything to Ouspensky's theory of spiral time, which proved, they assured us, that you lived through the centuries in an endless single pattern and that you are exactly the same jerk today that you were when you were playing house with Julia Agrippina in 42 A.D. and swindling the Earl of Shrewsbury's tailor out of a couple of suits in 1688. The playwrights who preferred psychiatry to any such complex hypothesis took an easier way out. If a character imagined, because he happened to break his wife's ribs while embracing her in joyous celebration of their seventieth wedding anniversary, that he was a reincarnated boa constrictor, they argued very simply that his mind was unhinged from having in his youth watched bartenders squeezing limes into gin rickeys and that the cure for his psychosis was milking

cows. The circle has now at length spun 'round again, and it is reincarnation that once more tries to court the box-office.

As in the case of the *When Knights Were Bold* kind of thing, Mr. Kaufman and his collaborator have shrewdly elected to spoof the business and have written of a sculptress who cancels her marriage to a stuffy bore in the hope that a more likely candidate in the shape of the lover who pursued her in previous incarnations will appear in this to clasp her to his hungry bosom. The lover shows up in the person of an art critic, just to make things a little more complicated and a deal more fantastic, but after the usual misunderstandings everything is straightened out as usual and the couple as usual swoon in each other's arms.

The play which, as you have probably guessed, aims at nothing more exalted than selling tickets, consists mainly in a succession of gags, one or two of them comical and the rest of them not. The stage business is similarly at one or two times fresh and amusing and at all other times a reincarnation of what we knew in a much earlier period of our theatregoing. The scenery performs trickily as in other days, and so do the lights. And a number of the characters are veterans, including the female wisecracker, the starchy suitor, the sharp female committee member, and the inevitable figure from the other world dubbed, as always, A Visitor.

The box-office promptly spurned Mr. Kaufman's suit.

*Arthur Carter*

WHEN it is a matter of experiencing a feeling of excitement I am, I suppose, an average citizen and, like any other such childish member of human society, obediently absorb the palpitation of a ninth inning rally, if only it be manifested by the home team, of a pretty woman who indicates that I am not entirely odious to her, of the opening of unexpected Christmas packages (despite years of painful disillusion), and of various other such simpletonisms. I depart from the norm, however, when it comes to melodrama as the theatre has offered it to us in these later years. The kick it once imparted seems to have left it; its authors have fallen on tepid ways; and when I want a good, old-fashioned tingle I have to seek it not in the blood and thunder drama but in such theoretically more becalmed sources as the wit of some of Fry's verse, the throb of Shaw's evergreen prose, the lilt of a Lehár melody, or maybe just a dancing girl with a bright face and legs not too mindful of gas tanks.

The latest engine of my indifference is Arthur Carter's *The Number*, which deals with the bookie and numbers rackets and hence contains enough business with telephones to outdo all the incompetent playwrights hereabouts for the next ten years. The profusion of calls has more or less to do with a ferocious gambler bent, when not taking bets, on ferreting out and confronting a double-crossing heel who, when not frantically putting in calls in other nervous directions, is endeavoring to persuade a young woman employee of the gambler that he is not using her as a tool to swindle her boss but is profoundly in love with her, a conversational adventure that consumes so much of the earlier part of the evening that when the time comes for the melodrama to get really down to work the audience is so flattened by the interminable prefatory wordage that it is too weary to be perked up. The heroine is, furthermore, a card. Married and with a small daughter, it appears that, despite

her protestations of virtue, she is simply crazy for an illicit fling at sex and, justifying her hankering with the cry, "I am not only a wife and mother, I am a woman!", satisfies her hay fever with the aforesaid heel, whose chief extra-boudoir attraction seems to be a passion for Italian noodles. Liberally mixed into the proceedings are the customary later day profanity and caustic allusions to the female anatomy, the slapping of women across the face by the out-of-the-corner-of-the-mouth-speaking tough guy, the relieving scenes showing the moral home life of the heroine's family, the confrontation of the wicked gambler by the wickeder heel with revolver, and most of the other sedative stencils of the contemporary versions of the kind of drama that once upon a time made peanuts the most appetizing and delicious food this side of the rue Saint-Honoré.

George Abbott, who has a gift for the staging of such nonsense, managed to extract all the life out of the lifeless materials that anyone short of a Steinach operating in conjunction with a suction pump could manage, but the end-product was little more than noise and the hoped for thrill quotient little more than that implicit in radio soap opera or celery tonic.

### *William Inge*

ONE of the drama's favorite themes is the introduction of a stranger into either a placid or beset group of people and his influence on them for good or ill. In the French plays, the newcomer is usually a Duc so expert in the arts of amour and of such irresistible charm that by the time he takes his departure from the Comtesse's château at least six or seven husbands, all of them prosaic businessmen of ample girth, have been cuckolded, and one of the saucier serving maids is with child. In the Spanish, the intruder is in most cases a vigorous young peasant, frequently named Ruiz or Pedro, whose appearance in the erstwhile tranquil village upsets matters no end and

whose appeal to the daughter of the well-to-do landowner, affianced to an upright but chilly young farmer, is so powerful that one night under the stars she engages in an indiscretion with him that leads to a stiletto duel with the outraged fiancé in which the lover is killed, to his seductee's uncontrollable grief. In the English plays, the stranger, always spelled with a capital S, appears as a vaguely occult figure (which means only that the lights are lowered before his entrance and suddenly turned up into a dazzling brilliance when he comes in) in the bosom of an acrimonious and mean-spirited household and by the time he leaves has converted everyone, including the cook, to the doctrine of Christianity and a wholesale gentility. In the American drama, the arrival most often has been of the female gender and has been presented either as a woman who has spent most of her life on the continent of Europe and hence is full of *savoir faire* (*A Strange Woman*, *Outrageous Fortune*, etc.) and whose worldly wisdom improves the hitherto narrow viewpoint and narrower morals of the family upon which she has descended; or as a brunette child of nature come from the tropics (*Pagan Lady*, etc.) whose innocent morality and carefree ways operate likewise upon a family, at first hostile to her, into whose circle she has been plunged, rather inexplicably, as a guest.

In William Inge's new play, *Picnic*, we return to the male tonic and engage the entrance into a small Kansas town and into the midst of a coterie of women, long without the satisfactions of masculine society, of a husky young ne'er-do-well who, pursuant to the chronic formula, gradually inculcates in them a sense of what they have been missing in life, overcomes the virginity of the customary romantic young daughter of one of the women, stirs up the repressed libidos of several others, both young and not so young, and leaves in his wake, if no illegitimate offspring, at least a comprehensive wistfulness. What the play was like in its original form, I do not know; but judging things from the author's antecedent, meritorious *Come*

*Back, Little Sheba*, it is a good guess that it was a much simpler, much less strained and altogether much more honest piece of work than what now meets the eye in the production presided over by Joshua Logan.

That production, operating with a vengeance in behalf of the popular box-office, is an excellent one by Broadway standards but is so over-elaborated one has a suspicion that what was very probably a play as relatively simple and affecting as something like "Home, Sweet Home" has been orchestrated Hollywood-wise for the Philharmonic Symphony Orchestra reinforced by a Sousa band, the Seventh Regiment Fife and Drum corps and the Andrews Sisters. While there periodically emerges from it clear evidence of Inge's faithful observance of life, sharp appreciation of character and gift for beautifully accurate dialogue, there are many more times when the playwright seems to be shoved into the background by way of allowing the director to make a name for himself. It is possible, of course, that the play as Inge wrote it was not what I imagine it to have been and that it was necessary for Logan to work his will upon it as he has done. But everything nevertheless points to the fact that it had a quality that was in greater part edged out of it in the campaign to Broadwayize it into a financial success.

We read, for example, that poor Inge was bombarded by "hundreds of suggestions" from outside sources and was prevailed upon to incorporate many of them into his script. We read further that scene after scene in that original script was subjected to criticism from volunteer analysts and that he was persuaded to give ear to the criticism. And we read still further that at one point in the rehearsals he was so upset at what Logan had done that he put on his hat and went around the corner to commune with a sympathetic bartender. And we are sufficiently convinced, in view of all of this, that the man who wrote the unlabored, unforced and independently upright *Come Back, Little Sheba* is not the man who wrote *Picnic* (its

original title was the more simply pictorial *Front Porch*) as we have now got it on the stage of the Music Box. What we have got is a big Broadway show at the expense of a smaller but doubtless considerably superior play.

That the original script was going to be put through the Broadway mill with the purpose of boxofficing it became more or less clear a year or so ago when the Theatre Guild, that now has combined with Mr. Logan in its production, had taken an option on it. I was sitting with Eugene O'Neill, then a patient in the Doctors' Hospital, when Lawrence Langner of the Guild dropped in for a brief visit. Since O'Neill and I had read about the option and since both of us greatly admired *Sheba*, we asked him about the author's new play. "It's a promising script," Langner said, "but it certainly needs changing." "How?" we inquired. "Well," replied Langner, "for one thing the girl falls for the young man at first sight and promptly gives herself to him. That certainly won't do." We politely inquired why it wouldn't do. "You just can't have that in the theatre. You have to prepare an audience for the girl's surrender with enough convincing dialogue," he stipulated, firmly. O'Neill let out a grunt that contained more ironic criticism than is to be found in the entire critical canon of Max Beerbohm, since from that moment on it was evident that Inge's play was going to be subjected to arbitrary and groundless alterations that would rid it of much of its sound observation and merit.

It may be, as I have said, that the play in its original form was lacking in certain particulars. That, I have no way of knowing, at least at present. But Langner's insisted upon change in it, which was duly made, along with the innumerable other mentioned changes only increases my curiosity to ascertain what it was like before the operators on it went into action. And my curiosity is augmented by the feeling that, like Langner's suggestion, many of the alterations, while probably beneficial to the box-office, have damaged what was doubtless a

finer and prouder piece of dramatic writing. Evidence of the extensive tinkering and of the determination, pretty grim at times, to theatricalize the whole out of its simplicity and intelligent design in behalf of the taste of a popular audience is all too plain. Mr. Logan, as everyone knows, is a shrewd and accomplished hand at such theatricalization and he has here again turned the trick with all his old proficiency. But, recalling the virtues of *Sheba*, the more one is enchanted by his artifice during the course of the evening, the more one is nevertheless stubbornly obsessed by the impression that what in Inge's writing must have had all the innocent littleness of life has been forced into an artificial theatrical bigness. The show in sum is, to repeat, a good one, but I wonder if it isn't a good show at the expense of a good play.

Only in the first of the two scenes of the third act does Logan's direction, such as it is, go askew. This portion of the act is devoted in ill-considered playwriting to showing successively the emotional aftermath of the affair between the old maid and the businessman on the one hand and of that between the young bravo and young girl on the other, and Logan seems to have been unable to devise any means of lessening the sense of repetition and heavy atmosphere. Otherwise, however, he is at his box-office best.

Performing in Jo Mielziner's practical, realistic setting, which pictures two shabby houses and the yard between them, is a first-rate, if overorganized, acting company. As the stranger who causes all the trouble, Ralph Meeker is remarkably effective, and not far behind him are Arthur O'Connell as the milky shopkeeper caught in the sex web of his spinning; Eileen Heckart as the spinster schoolteacher caught in the same web; Paul Newman as the college friend the intruder betrays; Janice Rule as the girl at anatomical issue; Kim Stanley as her ugly duckling, lovelorn sister; and the rest including Ruth McDevitt, Peggy Conklin, Reta Shaw and Elizabeth Wilson. It

is a field-day for everyone but the playwright, whose pole-vaulting stick has been lost in the shuffle.

### *George Axelrod*

GEORGE AXELROD's comedy, *The Seven Year Itch*, does not call for a favorable notice but the show that was made out of it calls for a very good one. The occasion provided a liberal education in what theatrical cunning can sometimes do for an indifferent script. Laying hold of this one, the producers, Courtney Burr and Elliott Nugent, cast it with such attractive players, saw to it that stage direction got so much more out of it than was really in it, mounted it with the help of Frederick Fox so happily, and—doubtless with no reluctance whatsoever on his part—persuaded co-producer Elliott, a nobby party in such matters, to invent and incorporate enough cute gags and bits of business that what in less enterprising hands might have remained just another commonplace Broadway comedy, and a not especially original one, was converted from predestined failure into a big success.

It is the popular critical notion, of course, that you can not make bricks without straw and that after all it is the script itself that counts above everything else, but while it should be so it isn't always so, and this is one case in point. If they had not cast Tom Ewell, who looks and acts like a cross between the late lamented Harold Ross and Sinclair Lewis and who can make such faces as are customarily reserved for Hallowe'en, and had hired for the role of the conscience-ridden married philanderer some pretty, straight comic, the script would have died in its tracks. And if in the same way they had cast the young girl of his fall from grace not with Vanessa Brown, who has exactly the right air of innocent sophistication and the talent to depict it with beautiful natural-

ness, but with the kind of *ingénue* who had studiously swallowed some Stanislavski and painfully showed it, the demise would have been even more sudden. These two players, along with the rest of the well-chosen company, were, apart from materials afforded them, a pleasure to watch on their own. Ewell, for all a periodic tendency to overembroider the lines, business and situations (which at that was probably necessary to keep alive and kicking what otherwise might have been torpid), has developed within himself many of the resources of a slick comedian, and it was a delight to contemplate him experimenting with himself. As to the little Brown girl, who was altogether fascinating and even fresher than the average daisy, even if she now and then overindulged herself in the business of being "radiant," well, if there are any more like her in Hollywood, let us have them instanter.

Speaking of Hollywood, it seems to be able to manufacture such fetching stage *ingénues* with all the fecundity that fails it when it comes to more mature actresses. Every two or three years it sends East some young person like Virginia Gilmore, June Lockhart or this Vanessa Brown who succeeds in charming the theatre in the degree that most of the older actresses it sends do not. Youth and good looks are of course part of the explanation, but not all. The real explanation is that the young ones' talent has not yet been hamstrung and corrupted by the film industry, whereas that of the older girls with the passing of time has been. The stage gets the youngsters before Hollywood has had its way with them and while they still have some natural ability left, while all that remains of the older ones is the corpse of a one-time possible talent and a rhinestone marquee name.

But enough of digression and back to the play. The plot you have encountered often enough before: the married man who feels that romantic sex should still be his privilege before he resigns himself to age and the peaceful life and who, when

his wife goes away on a holiday, has a fling with a younger woman, thereafter suffers the pangs of conscience, and returns silently contrite to home life. The devices with which the author has furthered the plot you have encountered almost as often: the business of the hero's conscience having its thoughts spoken by another actor's voice (sometimes, as in a play some seasons back and in a similar situation, by another actor in the flesh), the acting out by other characters, with trick lighting and sliding panels, of his worried visions, and so on. And the dramatic machinery is quite as recognizable: the embarrassing intrusion of a caller in the midst of an assignation, the business of a left-behind brief-case keying the intrusion, the business of the hero's fortifying his courage with drink, the routine opening of a bottle of champagne with the comic business of trying to pull the cork as preface to the seduction, etc. Moreover, the play is repetitive and fully fifteen minutes too long, and the hero's endless soliloquies would be one good place to manage the cutting. But, as observed, the manner of its doing served nonetheless to make a lot of it appetizing, as imaginative service has a way of doing even with inferior foods. And to give the author a little due, two or three of his scenes are nicely managed: one, suggested to him by Elliot Norton, that in which the man and girl take leave of each other after their brief affair; a second, that in which the girl comes to the man down a blind stairway through which she has hammered a path; and a third, that in which the recreant approaches and as quickly withdraws from a confession to his wife, who idly listens to him while stirring up a cherry pie.

### *N. Richard Nash*

At the end of the first act on the opening night of Mr. Nash's *See The Jaguar* at the Cort Theatre, I eavesdropped a conversation in the lobby between a lady and a gentleman, or as close

an approximation to the species as one is likely to see nowadays at first nights. "What in the world is the play all about?" asked the lady. "Blessed if I know, but it may become a little clearer in the next act, I hope," replied her escort. At the end of the second act I eavesdropped again. "I still am at a loss to make head or tail of things. Can you?" the lady inquired. "I'm baffled," answered the gentleman. "It is too complicated for me." At the conclusion of the evening, I listened to them on their way out. "Well," asked the gentleman, "how do you feel about it now?" The lady gave him a look such as any lady might give a man if he had stepped on her foot and not only broken it but bruised her slipper. "It's the gahdamnedest lot of garbled garbage I've ever seen and the hell with it," she groaned. The lady may have exaggerated matters slightly but not much, since Mr. Nash's brew was at least as overblown and empty a dose of melodramatic allegory as has been sprinkled on the stage since the late Channing Pollock was in his prime.

If perchance you skilfully detect in the above a slight note of gratuitous personal irritation and deplore it as unbecoming to respectable critical practice, I explain rather than apologize. It gravels me, I freely admit, when I find the theatre wasting its time and mine simply because producers like those in this case evidently are not sufficiently instructed in the reading of play scripts to distinguish between pretentious twaddle and some faint degree of merit. It gravels me doubly when I see much money and some talent wasted on scripts like this one when not only are immeasurably better ones available but ones that would stand an immensely better chance with the reviewers and hence in all probability with the box-office. And it gravels me even more and more disgusts me when producers solemnly offer their claptrap as worth my polite consideration and doubtless, when I write such words as these condemning it for what it really is, put them down as being prejudiced, destructive, offensive, and the mark of a man whom too

much theatregoing has made indifferent or worse. In short, I dislike to see the theatre, particularly in a day when it is crying for medicine to restore its health, being fed the kind of drugs that not only further enfeeble it but make it look contemptible.

Nash's play resembled nothing so much as one of those decayed old Western movies on television interlarded with symbolic commercials. Exactly what it was about, I haven't, like the aforequoted lady and gentleman, any idea, since the author, if he himself knew, which is doubtful, was so busy lending it what he imagined was weight by smearing it over with parable, allegory, symbolism and pseudo-literary gravy that it paralyzed itself out of all intelligibility. With its persecuted Ozark mountain halfwit lodged finally in an animal cage, it suggested that its author had had a bad dream involving O'Neill's *Hairy Ape*, Tom Mix, and nine or ten turkeys of the years past in which a girl was going to have a baby out of wedlock and had combined them all in a melodrama which he had written in his sleep.

I give you, however, a somewhat more specific idea. A loony old mountain woman, so went the business, has locked her son, now in his late teens, in an ice-house since birth (the symbolism being, I guess, that if one is thus sequestered from human society one will not catch a cold.) The son eventually escapes and is touched in the head from his long tenure in the refrigerator, meaning symbolically, I take it, that if a human being is denied association with his fellows he will get to be as crazy as they are. The sheriff of the mountain village, who runs a general store and to whom the son owes money for a bill his mother, suddenly deceased, had run up, decides that the boy is a dangerous criminal and organizes a posse to track him down. (The symbolism here is maybe the evils of dictatorship and oppression.) The movie chase then begins, and lasts an hour.

There is another character, Hopalong Virtue by name, though the program bills it as David Ricks, who believes that freedom and light are every man's privilege, who doesn't relish the idea of imprisoning in cells even weasels who like to bite people, and who helps the boy to elude the posse for a time but finally has to surrender him. (This symbolism is too much for my infant brain.) Hopalong extracts a promise from the sheriff, however, that when he drags the boy from Burden Hill (*vide Pilgrim's Progress*) he will not injure him. But the sheriff, symbolic it may be of intolerance and bigotry, is seized by peculiar dreams (*vide Freud*) and sticks the boy into one of the cages in front of his store in which, for the amusement of tourists, he has kept ocelots and ferrets. This makes Hopalong the Good seethe with righteous wrath and he liberates the boy only to be shot down by his rival for the pregnant heroine and killed, allegorically meaning, I suppose, that anyone who tries to free humanity from its shackles is a dunce. What the pregnant girl symbolizes, I do not know, unless it is that life will go on even if everybody is locked up in cages, which at least is comforting.

I seem to have forgotten to tell you that the comical Gabby Hayes character who figures in the Western movies is part and parcel of the doings and that as in the movies, so they tell me, he brings tears from the onlookers by getting badly wounded. And that there was an actor in the company, Harrison Dowd, who looked so much like Eugene O'Neill that it was surprising he didn't throw up when the play got around to putting the boy character in the zoo box. Arthur Kennedy was starred, for elusive reasons, as Hopalong. Lemuel Ayers, co-producer of the mess, did the scenery, which was the only tolerable feature of the exhibit, as well as the costumes, which looked like all other costumes in all other Westerns past, present and to come.

### *Joseph Kramm*

ONE of the differences between a fine dramatist and a mediocre one is that the former can take in hand materials that are essentially depressing and through the nobility of his art distil them into something productive of lift and even exaltation, whereas the latter, being contraceptively literal-minded, succeeds only in making them even more depressing than they naturally are. Joseph Kramm, author of *The Shrike*, is an example of the depression-cum-depression kind. It is not that he doesn't try hard to constitute himself otherwise. He even goes so far as to tack a mild semblance of happy ending onto his play, which logically calls for it about as much as *Charley's Aunt* does for a tragic one. But he lacks the mind, talent and depth for the job, and the result is just another of those things that bob up on Broadway from time to time under the guise of serious drama and make one wonder what, except for the chances they give an actress and actor to explode in the leading roles, their sponsors saw in them.

The wonder is somewhat modified, however, by the reflection that apparently the hardest kind of play for producers to resist is the one containing the female character who is all sweetness on the surface but all venom underneath. If it contains in addition a husband or other male character upon whom the serpentine female operates disastrously, the author, if he is not particular about going to jail, can simultaneously collect advance money on it from four or five ecstatic producers. Not counting old Papa Strindberg and Uncle Wedekind who dosed the stage with these devil-women and male victims in earlier years, the number of their imitators like Kramm who have proceeded with the business must be legion. How many such clinics I have seen in my long stretch of theatregoing is a problem my deficient mathematical educa-

tion is unable to cope with, but they have included scores like *Craig's Wife*, *They Walk Alone*, *Guest In The House*, *Cobra*, *The Unchastened Woman*, etc. I recall one period in the Twenties when the late Jim Huneker, that grand old boy, after a protracted succession of the five-letter females alarmedly jumped on the water-wagon under the delusion that it just couldn't be and that he must be beginning to see things. I remember it well indeed, since Mencken and I doubly and finally convinced him of his symptoms by taking him one night, after the seventh of the plays, to call on a refined lady of our acquaintance who, unbeknownst to him, was an artiste in a Fourteenth street museum and who at a cue from us retired from the drinking congress in her cosy apartment off Union Square and casually reappeared with the snakes which she used in her act. But all this, alas, is rosemary, so back to the realistic present and to *The Shrike*.

Mr. Kramm's predatory female is inserted into a documentary blast against the vicious conduct of hospitals for the mentally deranged, the authenticity of which the author establishes by referring at one point to the terrors exposed in the motion picture, *The Snake Pit*, which gives you an idea. Taking a spot of hint from her sister in Strindberg's *The Father*, the she-devil connives with one wile and another to impress the psychiatric authorities that her husband, whom she is determined to hold against his love for another woman, is headed for insanity. As the price of his release from the institution she demands his return to her and, caught helpless in her snare, he is compelled to submit.

That there is still forceful drama in the theme, for all its long service, is plain, but Kramm has buried it under such a mass of hospital detail, involving repetitive psychiatric examinations, byplay among the patients and Belasco realism in the way of stage trappings, that his main story often gets lost and has a time of it getting back on its feet again. The writing,

moreover, though here and there not without some melodramatic potency, is elementary. Nothing is left to suggestion; everything is chalked up in black and white, and the result is a thinning of audience emotion by grinding it on the whetstone of literality instead of a stimulation of it through the colorings of dramatic imagination. But almost everything else about the exhibit was so expert that the play took on the surface aspect of being very much better than it is. José Ferrer's performance of the hounded husband was capital acting, quite remarkable for its plan and economy; Judith Evelyn's evil wife, though confused in the writing, was managed with uncommon finesse in the subtle projection of selfishness and rapacity under the outer coating of solicitude and gentility; the many other characters, admirably cast and directed by Ferrer, were every one of them excellent; and the setting and lighting of the hospital by Howard Bay, forbidding and terrifying, handsomely assisted the general atmosphere. Everything, in a word, represented the theatre at its most proficient—everything, that is, but the play upon which such affectionate effort was expended. It was all much like an elaborately wrapped and beribboned large package delivered by a flashing coach and four, which when opened and peered into discloses under the wealth of fancy paper only a small firecracker.

*Truman Capote*

SEVEN or so years ago William Saroyan tried out a play in the Cape May, New Jersey, summer theatre. It was called *Sweeney In The Trees* and it dealt with a young man who went to live in a tree to escape contact with annoying humanity. It was not a good play since it suffered from its author's habitual disorder and carelessness in the organization of his materials, but it

nonetheless was not without his equally habitual fresh imagination and humor, and it had some delightfully original moments that made the evening in general rewarding.

Truman Capote has now appeared on the New York scene with a play, *The Grass Harp*, that deals with an old maid who goes to live in a tree similarly to escape contact with irritating humanity. It, too, is not a good play since its author, who has derived it from his novel of the same name, proves himself an inept hand at dramaturgy, but it also contains some imagination and it has snatches of interest, though by and large it misses its intended effect, badly. It misses it for three reasons. The first is Capote's dislocation which results in his elements of fantasy being impaired by intrusions of realism and in his elements of realism that somehow acquire a shade of the fantastic. The second is a humor so literal and flyblown that it frightens the fantasy out of itself. "He proposed to me," confides the old maid to her Negro servant. "What did he propose?" cracks the latter. "We are much nearer to God than you are," declares the spinster from her tree perch to the folk below. And the third, to put it baldly, is a copious splash of schoolboy writing.

I have said that the play contains some imagination but the imagination, such as it is, sticks pretty close to the ground and is not assisted by lifting it aloft, with the aid of scene carpentry, into a tree. When it tries fitfully to soar on its own, it resembles the little colored paper spirals that youngsters toss into the air and whose flight is but momentary. To those who are inclined to regard any attempt at fantasy, however feeble, as providing *ipso facto* evidence of imagination, the play of course appeals handsomely as something it is not. Confounding its production aspects with the script itself, such theatre-goers attribute to the latter the poetic effect of Cecil Beaton's fanciful scenery and costumes and Virgil Thomson's fanciful incidental music, much as in the past they have mistaken Jo

Mielziner's imaginative stage settings and the incidental music for Tennessee Williams poetry in the case of *The Glass Menagerie* and other of his plays. It is and often has been that way in our theatre.

Though the direction of the exhibit by Robert Lewis led some reviewers to imagine that the play has symbolic overtones, Capote announces that there are none and that all he has meant is, very simply, that people, whatever means they exercise to do so, can not escape from their fellow-men and their responsibilities to them. His honesty thus only emphasizes the sparseness of his work, not, true enough, of his theme, which is valid enough for all its familiarity, but in his treatment of it. To that treatment he brings a sketchiness unrelieved by any poetic color and reinforced only with a perfectly obvious and obviously expressed philosophy. The scene wherein his spinster and her associate refugees gather around a warming fire beneath the tree and expound their views amounts in sum to little more than a recitation of the lyrics of a Broadway music show with their sentimental reflections on love and life. The recitations are pitched in the semi-melancholy tone of such lyrics and hence persuade the more susceptible listeners that there is a considerable soulfulness in them, together with a wisdom distilled from long experience and suffering, but to any ear not taken in by the sound of melodious voices and laryngeal gulps their essence is heard to be as platitudinous and as schmaltzy as it factually is. In his novels and short stories Capote, who can write very skilfully at times, successfully embroiders the obvious out of the reader's consciousness. But the stage is a less leisurely medium and, since it curtails such deceptive excursions, the core of his thought becomes revealed in all its barrenness.

Many of the colleagues delivered themselves of sweet words on the acting performances. With a few exceptions, however, the troupe struck me as having a stock company scent. Georgia

Burke, in the role of the Negro servant who professes to be of Indian blood and who goes around with a pet goldfish which, heaven spare us, she addresses affectionately by name, was one of the exceptions, though now and then so determined in dialect that she was incomprehensible; and Russell Collins as the weary judge who joins up with the arbor party handled his role with an equal aptitude. But most of the rest were cut-and-dried. Thus, Mildred Natwick brought to the portrayal of the spinster character all the instruments of histrionic conventionality, as did Ruth Nelson to the role of her base-spirited sister who attempts to do her out of a patent medicine formula that promises to make a fortune. Johnny Stewart acted the youthful relative who accompanies the spinster to her leafy abode with a sophistication more suitable to a play laid in the Stork Club; Jonathan Harris made the sister's swindling accomplice a brother to the assistant villain in the old Stair and Havlin shows; Lenka Peterson was the *ingénue* love interest without interest; and Alice Pearce, arbitrarily and ridiculously incorporated into the play as a vendor of cosmetics, performed what was nothing but a revue skit with more mugs than ever were observable on an old barbershop shelf. The occasion, in brief, was pleasing to the eye but, save for Thomson's music, less than satisfactory to the ear. Its externals had all the poetic feeling that the play hadn't, and the final impression was of a slim volume announced on the cover to be verse which, when opened, is found to consist mostly of blank pages.

In the play, to sum up, the joint influence of Saroyan and Tennessee Williams on its author was as manifest as the influence of Jo Mielziner on Cecil Beaton, its scene designer, and as the influence of all three on its producers, Saint Subber and Rita Allen. The script combines an attempt at Saroyan whimsicality and eccentric humor with an attempt at Williams lyricism, or what passes for it, just as the stage settings com-

bined Mielziner's scrim curtains with his mixture of dreaminess and realism. And the producers, evidently admirers of the trio, swooned over what they doubtless viewed as a tripled threat. I am afraid, however, that my own equilibrium remains still undisturbed. Though Capote tries for the Saroyan flavor, he has none of the latter's devil-may-care blood in his pen and rather gives off the impression of a more studiously "literary" writer. His imagination, furthermore, is infinitely more constricted and contained than the Armenian bad-boy's and hasn't the latter's often winning wildness and surprise. Taking much the same basic idea that Saroyan frolicked with in the before-mentioned *Sweeney In The Trees*, he corsets it out of any easy, carefree flight and the result is a fantasy that remains largely earthbound. His humor, in addition, is mostly of a conventional and worn cut; it lacks the bright wings that Saroyan's has and is much the kind we usually get from one of the lesser Broadway revue skit writers. Nor has he Williams' even occasional gift for lyric expression; when he essays it little more comes from his ink than something that resembles one of the slightly better Tin Pan Alley romantic ditties. I speak, of course, solely in respect to this play; in both his novels and his short fiction, as has been said, he demonstrates much greater facility. But in his first effort in the dramatic form the virtues are absent, largely because he has deemed it necessary, in his limited experience, to remove the bloom from his prose and make it conform to what he believes or has been led to believe is the stage's always arbitrary demand for barer, skeletonized expression. The consequence is a play that, while it purports to be fantasy, is too frequently nothing but realism with colored ribbons in its hair.

### Stanley Young

THE MERITS of Charles Dickens and his position in literature are of course beyond question and no one has had more enjoyment in reading him than I have had, but I hope I may be forgiven for saying that, after years of experiencing him in various phases on the stage, I am happily reconciled to leaving him and taking him in the library. How many plays derived from his works I have seen, I do not exactly remember, but I know that by now I have had my fill, and the fill includes also musical shows whose books have been extracted from him. I realize that this is *lèse majesté* in the eyes of all true addicts, since their idol in any shape is as sacrosanct and above criticism to them as their dogs and wives. Yet here I am, probably alone or at best with little company, willing to forego any more of the otherwise unimpeachable Charles in dramatic or musical form. If you call it surfeit, you may be partly right, but I prefer to attribute my attitude to something more precisely critical, and that is a distaste for anything diluted, whether it be novelists, friendship, or wine. And the stage, when it comes to novelists, is—as need hardly be repeated—usually a dissolvent the like of which is not much surpassed even by the bagpipe in the field of music.

I refer, naturally, to estimable novelists. In the case of poor ones the stage often offers an improvement, since it not only by virtue of its limitations and restrictions happily curtails them but lends them at least a physical animation where there was only a literary inertia. But the good novelist suffers from the very things that help the poor one and Dickens offers us proof of the fact. However closely the stage follows him, what we most frequently get is less his flesh than the bones of his skeleton. There are people, true, who relish digests and outlines of literature, and they find plays distilled from a celebrated author perfectly satisfactory. But they remain the same

kind of fish who indulge in and are satisfied by short-cuts-to-culture books, quick lunches and abbreviated nightshirts. And they are those who doubtless will be enough gratified by the play made by Stanley Young from *The Pickwick Papers* and titled *Mr. Pickwick*.

If Dickens has to be done on the stage, I suppose that the materials of *The Pickwick Papers* are more closely adapted to the purpose than those of any other of his novels. They have even served musical comedy fairly well, as dodderers who saw De Wolf Hopper's *Mr. Pickwick* nigh a half-century ago may recall. Their sole drive is toward humor in terms of cartoon and caricature; the characters are nonetheless types that are remarkably acute and widely recognizable; and the inherent sketchiness of the whole assists rather than handicaps stage treatment. There is, in short, not the dramatic problem that confronts the author's novels of broader and deeper calibre. Mr. Young, all things considered, has made a pretty likely job of transposition for those not too fastidious and the resulting exhibit, which was imported from London, probably contented if it did not unduly excite those who visited it, provided they were willing to overlook certain inadequacies here and there in the acting company.

The average actor engaged to play Dickens characters, lacking the thorough knowledge and understanding of them indicated by an Emyln Williams, relies for his interpretation mostly upon costume and makeup and seeks to present their shadings not from within but largely through tints from his makeup box and tricks of his voice. The end-product is an approximation to the illustrations of the characters familiar to lovers of the author's books but much less any approximation to the human beings behind the illustrations. Since, as noted, the present play, like the novel, is grounded on caricature, the difficulty is in considerable part diminished and the portrayals patterned upon the admirable Seymour and the Hablot Brown

("Phiz") drawings come more readily to stage life. Nevertheless, while allowing to the presentation its theatrical critical due, I still miss in it much of the excellent fun, much of the literary light and much of that teasing recognition provided by a reading of the novel. There remains some amusement in the play but more, much more, in the book, for however the stage may succeed in re-creating the characters of fiction it fails in a like re-creation of that extra degree of imagination which developed and illuminated them when first one embraced them on the printed page.

### *Andrew Rosenthal*

It is Andrew Rosenthal's misfortune that he was not born Ferenc Molnár or, if that could not be arranged, Somerset Maugham. There was nothing wrong with his *Horses In Mid-stream*, which closed after only four performances, that could not have been made right had one or the other of the two playwrights written it. Molnár would have veined it with the tuneful wistfulness of sentiment that in its present form was resolved largely into a coy dissonance and something resembling a forcedly sophisticated torch song, and Maugham, had he treated the theme, would have filtered it through the aromatic wit it now lacked. That theme would have been ideally suited to the skills of either one of them.

The play's idea, in brief, concerns a generically sedate New Englander who, no longer able to endure the shrewish bitterness of his wife, rids himself of her by giving her all his considerable worldly goods and who for thirty-one peaceful and contented years has lived without benefit of clergy on the warm and dreamy island of Elba with a liberal and charming French novelist. Both, when the play opens, are in their seventies and to their idyllic retreat comes one day the man's grand-

daughter who has long heard from her outraged Massachusetts family of her grandfather's odious sinfulness and who wants to see for herself its demoralizing effects. What she instead sees converts her, threatened by the same kind of existence her grandfather experienced if she remains in the unyielding puritanical atmosphere of home, to the way of life she has found on Elba and it is only her venerable and essentially conventional relative's understanding that what may be good for some is not necessarily good for others that persuades her ultimately to reconsider.

It is an idea, obviously, with many possibilities for delightful comedy if properly orchestrated by a playwright with an ear for the gentle music of life and one whose experience of it has been full, not to mention one whose pen has in it, as Molnár's had, that touch of melancholy that lies at the core of all thoughtful happiness or, as Maugham's has, the observational wit that serves well a catalysis of the conventional and unconventional. Rosenthal, though he now and then touches off nicely the smaller sparks of character and though he here and there manages a scene intelligently, otherwise is deficient in the required gifts and his play, lacking as well in skilful dramaturgy and in psychological education, comes off only as a rumor of what it should be and in other hands might have been.

The danger signs were evident early in the evening. No sooner did the young granddaughter sit down to table with the elderly lovers than what might better have been gradually brought out in the play, to wit, the background and moral viciousness of the New England family through two generations, was immediately detailed at such conversational expository length that it amounted less to dramatic dialogue than to a reading, with footnotes, of an extended genealogy chart. And as things progressed, a verb which in the circumstances was scarcely fitting, not only did the incessant talk drain most

of the blood out of the theme but the author's psychological insight into the young girl and the British islander with whom she flings herself into an affair was so muddled that his thesis trailed off into the ridiculous. He asked us to believe that a young woman in love with a man, and *vice versa*, and who has joyfully given her all to him would in exactly thirty-two seconds flat decide to have nothing more to do with him simply because her grandfather cooks up on the spot what is plainly a lie about his intentions. And, furthermore, that the man who loves her would as suddenly acquiesce in the falsehood and cast her abruptly from him.

If this was what Rosenthal originally wrote, the more discredit to him. Knowing the machinations of the Broadway theatre as we do, one prefers charitably to think that he was prevailed upon to doctor up a more truthful scene, and one more in keeping with his theme, in order to safeguard the theoretical moral prejudice of the box-office. One way or the other, however, the scene as we got it was as out-of-key and psychologically idiotic as would be one showing Camille rejecting Armand because she had been told by the elder Duval he had once stolen a watch.

The direction of the play by Cedric Hardwicke, with an assist by Breaigne Windust, only contributed to the evening's general air of lethargy, though I must say that, had I myself been in charge of the staging, I would not have known how to inject any greater spirit into the static dialogue and dramatic plan. Hardwicke, visibly uncomfortable in the role of the grandfather, did little with it but alternately slouch his corpus into chairs and onto benches to indicate the weariness of age and stand up with immoderate erectness to indicate that there was nevertheless some life left in the old boy. An excellent actor, he here simply suggested that he was sorry he got himself into the thing and was conserving his talents for something more to his taste.

Lili Darvas was endearing as his Colette-like *inamorata* save for an accent at times so smoggy that it was next to impossible to make out the meaning of her lines. Thus, when she alluded to the granddaughter's school, Vassar, she articulated it German-wise as Wasser, leading one to imagine that the girl had got her education at a spa. And when she instructed the servant, "If there is laughter, serve strawberries; if there is not, serve oranges" (which, incidentally, was a sample of the impenetrability of the author's wit) it came out something like "If there ease lobster, serve straw bérrets; if there ease not, serve our ranches." Diana Lynn was a pretty ingénue and handled several of her less emotional scenes attractively, but her voice still stands in need of training and more dramatic experience will help her when fuller feeling is called for. Scott Forbes was a big stick of wood as the man of her sexual excursion and offered a brand of acting that did not seem to go much beyond scowls to register impatience, grunts to imply independent masculinity, or anything at all to indicate anything else. Ludmilla Toretzka as the hideous old Italian household servant had the play's most amusing line when she told of having been given the job just as her destitution was about to drive her to street-walking and exclaimed, "Think what I would look like now if I had become a prostitute!"

### *Horton Foote*

HORTON FOOTE'S melodrama, *The Chase*, attempts to cater to the elementary class of theatregoers who are interested in what will happen next as opposed to the more educated species who are interested in what will be thought next. Or, in other words, to theatregoers who prefer suspenseful physical action to the suspense induced by cerebral agility. The difference on the one hand is the difference between the nervous ex-

citement experienced in watching a man poised teeteringly on a twentieth story window ledge and threatening to jump off and, on the other, the amused curiosity experienced in listening to a Shaw or Chesterton persuasively arguing that the aforesaid seeming jackass is the most rational man beheld on earth since Copernicus. I by no means entirely deprecate the entertainment inherent in melodramatic suspense if it is artfully maneuvered. I myself, indeed, was a mark for it up to the age of ten, when I became sophisticated. It can be as childishly bemusing and bogusly stimulating as drinking water out of a whisky bottle or smoking corn silk in an opium pipe. So, even if you are past ten but still of an arrested development and such a goose that you can get gooseflesh out of the business, that is your privilege and delight. But, wildly supposing that you are such a fowl, I nevertheless doubt whether the sort of suspense offered by Foote is the kind to promote a satisfactory response in you. The reasons are so obvious that I am ashamed to put them into print; but before going in to them, a line about the plot that, it was hoped, would generate the tension.

A desperate killer, so goes the story, has escaped from jail with the purpose of adding to his killings the sheriff who, he believes, has been responsible for hounding him into prison. His threatened vengeance and pursuit of the sheriff constitute the material that the author and producer imagined would induce such spinal quivers in an audience as would shake the very floor of a theatre. We now come to the above-mentioned reasons why, far from accomplishing any such thing, an audience remains as passive as if the bill of the evening were Olivia de Havilland pursuing her art in *Candida*. (Incidentally and at that, there was nonetheless more suspense in anticipating that Miss de Havilland would fall on her face on the National stage before the Shaw play was over than in the whole of the Foote melodrama.)

The first reason the suspense is nonexistent after the first scene in the nine-scene play is that it is simply talked about by the actors rather than self-operative. The pursuing killer has his whereabouts discussed at length—and with high trepidation on the part of the sheriff, his wife and the other characters on stage—but, except for a shot through a window, he seems as remote from the immediate action as if he were General Sheridan in *Shenandoah*. The audience wants him at least to show his face at the window a couple of times and, when he does not do even that, mumbles to itself that it is being defrauded by an author who believes its disappointment will somehow contribute even more to its tension.

The second reason is that, even when there are vague symptoms of suspense, the suspensive mood is destroyed by having the sheriff and his wife, who hangs around his office with the tedious persistence of a tycoon's secretary in an old Charles Klein play, enter into either mushy dialogues on the baby the wife is expecting and the little home they hope one day to have in the peaceful country or more wearisome disquisitions on the ethics of shooting down the vicious killer or returning him to prison to let the law take its deliberate and proper course. And the third reason—I wish to repeat that I dislike to set down such gratuitous criticism, since in its way it is as redundant as praising Bach—is that the whole is written, acted and directed in such Class-C movie terms that, even if the killer popped up a dozen times out of a grandfather's clock or from behind the portières, there would not be enough suspense in the show to sustain a pair of youngsters' short pants.

The discussion of ethics above noted only adds to the evening's supine nature, since it seems to have been dragged in to make what is otherwise only a cheap screen Western appear to be something a bit more significant than it is. Worse,

though the author and his director have doubtless esteemed it as something fresh and vital, it is exactly the kind of thing that figured in the various lynching dramas of years long gone by and indeed in even the peanut melodramas of the years before that. "We must preserve the sanctity of the law; man can not take the law into his own hands!" declaimed Jack Dalton in *The Creed Of The Sierra Madres*, to the applause of the old gallery gods. "We must try and try and still try to teach people not to take the law upon themselves!" proclaims Sheriff Hawes in *The Chase*, to the snorts of the customers down front.

José Ferrer directed the lame whoopdedoodle after the increasingly observed formula which seems to imagine that, if a play is paced so slowly an audience thinks the actors have been overcome with a sleeping sickness, it will acquire an appearance of immense depth and authority. The acting company was headed by John Hodiak, who I am told is a big screen favorite, and Kim Hunter, who I am further informed was lately awarded a film Oscar, all of which augments the impression that the exhibit, while not a refugee from Hollywood, was hopefully intended as a Broadway immigrant thereto. Mr. Hodiak, an exponent of the Ralph Bellamy histrionic school, though less theatrically experienced in it, indicated a remaining fondness for those prolonged pauses and meditative stares into space which, I am apprised, pass for extremely proficient acting in the films. And Miss Hunter indicated an equal, acquired fondness for that intensive "listening" and collateral rapt ocular gazing which, if exercised in real life while a man was speaking to her, would impel him to believe that not only was she in all probability deaf but the victim of a glaucoma that called for the immediate attention of an eye surgeon.

*A. B. Shiffrin*

MR. SHIFFRIN'S *Twilight Walk* is still another in the line of criminal case histories which usually have a way of disinteresting theatre audiences who from considerable experience of them have come to appreciate that they will substitute lengthy disquisitions on psychology and psychiatry for any active drama and who have become tired waiting around until their third acts duly bring on again the inevitable scene in which the murderous pervert confronts the terrified heroine. The scene is always much the same. Though she has suspected the young man, the heroine has entertained a reasonable doubt about him and is not loath to sit on the sofa with him when he comes in and bids her have a talk with him. All goes peaceably for a while until, with a strange gleam in his eye, he begins stroking her hair and mumbling how beautiful she is and how his mother or someone else in his family has treated him like a baby and thwarted his desires. The moment the hair-stroking business begins, the heroine, for a reason known only to barbers and hairdressers with a psychoanalytical turn of mind, becomes certain that the fellow is a case and, with one wile or another, seeks to put him off until she can think of a way either to get rid of him or summon help. But the murderous gleam in his eye now becomes more murderous still and the next thing she knows he is fondling her white throat with his fingers and she horrifiedly realizes it is these same clutching fingers that have strangled his earlier victims. The heroine, however, may rest assured that her life is safe, since in no play doesn't succor arrive in time to spare her. Shiffrin's sole concession to originality is the substitution of a bench in Central Park for the sofa.

The further weakness of most such plays lies, as has been said, in halting their movement for the periodic injection into them of squirts of psychiatry, which usually sound as if the author had pasted into his script paragraphs torn out of some

book on the subject. The present playwright makes things a little worse by sticking into it some juvenile moralizing of his own. Nor was his play improved by his or his director's notion that the old stuff might be lent an air of novelty by loading it with character extras to supply Central Park atmosphere. Ever since Elmer Rice managed the atmosphere business successfully in *Street Scene*, less shrewd playwrights and their directors have seemed to believe they could achieve the same thing merely by engaging eight or nine actors out of work and willing to do anything for the Equity minimum, having them put on freak makeups, and incorporating them into the scenery. Instead of creating anything like relevant atmosphere, what they accordingly create is only the suggestion of a mute vaudeville that not only does not in the least help the play but gets in the way of its forward movement.

The Shiffrin troupe, headed by Nancy Kelly, did its best in the cases of Charles Proctor, who played the psychopathic killer with a gratifying lack of the physiognomic torture customary to such roles, and Virginia Vincent, who handled the small role of one of his victims with a commendable self-editing of its written requirements of conventional rasping brashness and over-tough address. The play's love scenes were made more sickly than they were in the writing by direction which followed the standard, cute pattern of having the heroine coyly press her forefinger against her young man's nose and lovingly paw his hair, which, if ever I have to look at it again, will induce me, an otherwise normal man, to commit some homicide of my own. And my impulse will be aggravated if ever again I am asked to observe a male character surveying a female character's shapely limbs with the remark to her newspaper admirer that "she would make a good leg-man," not to mention the female dialect character who winds up a diatribe against marriage with an adoring glance at her baby and a moist reflection on how wonderful it is.

*Arthur Laurens*

THE THEATRE in the last five or six years has reduced the profession of criticism to the mere business of reviewing, and occasionally to something even less than that. Plays of any genuine quality have been as rare as hospital beefsteak and the scene has been flooded either with outright dramatic rubbish or, at best, exhibits of some superficial smoothness or relative novelty that call only for casual, light appraisal, for the most part easily within the competence of a cub reporter possessed of a dark suit. Any scholarly criticism in their case would be as absurd as in that of vaudeville or ice skating shows, and not only as absurd but as impossible. All they merit is brief description, culminating in a grunt.

The drama critic has thus become the forgotten man and his place taken either by the reviewing reporter or by the erstwhile critic despairingly hanging onto his professional trapeze with his teeth and seeking to provide a show that, while it revolts his nature and to some extent his readers, at least privileges him the continued opportunity to buy shoes for the baby and eat. When, accordingly, his less thinking readers protest and deplore his descent into triviality and wayward humor they miss the point and charge him, who is not responsible, with the shortcomings of his medium. They label him undertaker oblivious of the fact that corpses are not customarily handled by architects. They deride him as chronic cynic apparently on the theory that optimism is desirable in the face of indubitably pessimistic circumstance. They deplore not the truth of his findings but the manner of his findings. They are, in short, critics not of his appraisals, though they do not seem to realize it, but of the materials provided to them.

One of their favorite complaints against him is that there is generally something good to be found, however small, in even the worst of plays and that he should emphasize it irrespective of the prevailing bad. This, of course, is most often

the mark of the congenitally sanguine, inasmuch as a wretched play is likely to be wretched all the way through and since a possibly acceptable performance in it by one of its actors or a possibly acceptable bit of scene designing is scarcely enough to persuade any critic, save he be the sort given to evasion of the main issue, to call anything more than perfunctory attention to it. But, even if there is a moment of relative dramatic merit in the waste of trash, the critic who, while admitting and endorsing it, would settle upon it as an apology for the miserable rest would be the kind who, in the late George C. Tyler's philosophy, would be grateful, when he fell on the icy pavement and broke his leg, that it was not his new derby hat.

Not only is any drama criticism wasted on claptrap but it is almost equally wasted, as intimated, on the numerous plays that lie this side of even the middle-ground. One such is Arthur Laurents' comedy, *The Time Of The Cuckoo*, which bears a close affinity to any number of plays we have been seeing for the last twenty-five years. It begins to look, indeed, as if one of the most persistent items in the theatre is that in which a spinster of puritanical moral bent yet longing for the missed taste of romance takes herself tourist-wise to a foreign and warmer land where she encounters it in the person of a charmer who she presently discovers is a married man. The shock withers her hoped for fling and in the end we see her returning, with a wistful sigh and with what is presumably an acquired wisdom of sorts, to her homeland. Through Dodie Smith's *Autumn Crocus* to Elmer Rice's *The Grand Tour* of only a season or two ago the theme has been with us, and here it is with us again.

On this occasion the spinster is an American as she was in the Rice play and her holiday, as also in the Rice play, takes her to Europe, in this case Italy instead of Switzerland, and there the business pursues its time-honored course. Though Mr. Laurens has managed one or two of the scenes nicely, he complicates the familiar issue with some lugged-in theatrical-

ity that not only weakens his play but gives it the ring of having been arbitrarily doctored up in the hope of giving it more Broadway box-office body and thus, besides ridding it of much of its conviction, makes it seem false and a little foolish. Instead of adhering to the oppugnant moral viewpoints of the two parties to the romance he drags in such extrinsic matters as financial considerations, black market money exchange, etc., all of which disturb his tune and render it out of key with his theme. It also melodramatizes his heroine's sentiment out of key with the character he asks us to accept and, in addition, since she is shown to understand and sympathize with her potential lover's freely confessed lack of funds, makes her subsequent sudden indignation and aversion to him ridiculous.

The play, furthermore, indulges to its loss in all the stereotyped side elements of its general species: the idiosyncrasies of American tourists abroad, the picture postcards, the humors of strange foreign foods, the cheating merchants and street urchins, the free-loving Latins and greater moral rectitude of the Americans or whatever Northern visitors happen to be involved and so on. The one novel touch is the Italian charmer's final decision to put the now amorously determined spinster from him on the ground that her ingrained primness and moral qualms would be too much of a nuisance and burden to his way of life, which makes all the sense that some of the preceding scenes do not.

Shirley Booth was admirable as the lonely romance seeker and lent the evening what vitality it had; and Dino di Luca, in his first appearance on the New York stage, served well enough as the Romeo, though his accent at times was troubling and though the producers' evident faith that they may have uncovered another such magnetic figure as Ezio Pinza was ill-founded. A word should be added for a youngster named José Perez who, a program note told us, was discovered opening doors at a Broadway delicatessen and drafted to play

the bit role of the conniving, avaricious urchin, and who gave as sharp a performance and as amusing a one as we had engaged in a fledgling in some time.

### *Horner and Miles*

CONCRETE evidence of television's potential threat to the theatre was lately to be observed on the stage of the Royale. The menace was illustrated by a weapon called *Hook 'N Ladder* which was contrived, apparently with sinister deliberation, by a pair of TV operatives, the Messrs. Charles Horner and Henry Miles, gag writers for the medium, and which was produced with what seemed to be an equally sinister calculation by one Al Moritz, a member of the staff of one of television's most ardent propagandists. Their cabal against the legitimate stage, should it be joined by others of their ilk, presages ruin for the theatre, since many more such assaults upon it will inevitably drive people out of it, and to powerful drink.

Television, it is well known, is a projected amusement device founded on the conviction that the four principal instruments for entertaining the public are old jokes, older plays, still staler movies and studiously whimsical or whimsically studious questions-and-answers games, all interrupted at regular intervals by ballyhooers of deodorants, pancake flour, safety razor blades, iceboxes, and cigarettes. It is conducted, it seems, chiefly by a posse of tall, skinny young men in ready-made, too long sports jackets who before its advent were mainly hopeful actors who could not get jobs outside the summer barns, and by older and more obese men who give the younger ones the orders and get what money there is lying around. Gag writers are, however, the real princes of the domain. I am told there are thousands of them, culled from the sidewalks, alleys and lesser saloons, who are paid all the money the portly men

do not pocket to dream up yaks, yoks, yiks and yuks that will make the listeners oblivious of the fact that what they are actually being taken for is not entertainment but house-to-house merchandizing, and without the privilege of slamming the door on the salesmen or sicing the family dog on them.

The Messrs. Horner and Miles aforesaid, so successful are their gags on video that every time my own dog wanders unthinking into the room and hears one he frantically dashes right out again, have now done for a theatre audience what they hitherto have done for my wire-hair. Though they have refrained from accompanying their jocosities with pistol shots, they otherwise match Olsen and Johnson in the ferocity of their humors, at least in intention. In achievement, I fear they are not quite so prosperous. They are of course bound to bring off a faintly bearable wheeze once in a couple of hours, just as anyone who sticks resolutely to anything is bound soon or late to bring off something, however humble, but when it comes to the whole hog their product is scarcely to be described as bacon, even by an enthusiastic vegetarian. What they seem to imagine is a play is nothing but a series of television and radio bits threaded together with a sort of plot about the attempt of a trio of city spelers to sell a fire truck to a grafting hick town. The bits involve an assortment of eccentrics indigenous to the town who are illegitimate descendants of the *You Can't Take It With You* species born of a piece of damp crayon; and the general proceedings masquerade as acceptable farce under the delusion that a flat line may be made to seem screamingly funny if the actor throws everything short of a fit while delivering it and that an even flatter situation may panic the house by having the players comport themselves as if they had Chinese wasps in their nether garments. Extending my sympathy to the large cast, which included one or two actors, it remains only to say that the noise on the stage was exceeded for the single performance the show lasted by that made by the

late lamented Charles Hoyt heaving around in his grave at the thought of such a desecration of the farce materials of which he was a pre-television master.

### *Arthur Miller*

THOUGH I am scarcely known as a congenital optimist, since in my old definition any such sugartreat is the kind of person who believes a housefly is looking for a way to get out, I can not entirely disbelieve that patience sometimes has its reward, even in the theatre. And so it has presently come about that, just as we all were more or less convinced that our American playwrights in the aggregate and with small exception had eyes only for the box-office, a man of some rather higher pride and ambition has made a reappearance on the cheapjack scene. His name, Arthur Miller, and his play, *The Crucible*. It was not, true, altogether a surprise, since though a pair of his earlier efforts, excursions into Ibsen, were critically questionable, even they indicated his independent resolve, and since his excellent *Death Of A Salesman*, that happily turned out to be box-office in spite of itself, indicated it even more. So it is that, while his newest play is very far beneath the merit of the last named and is in fact an out of hand dramatic performance, it provides us with the encouragement in respect to our theatre that we badly stand in need of. It may go down under critical gunnery, but its author's flag keeps flying, brightly.

Dealing with the historical Salem witch-hunts and witchcraft trials in the late years of the seventeenth century and wringing from them a lashing phillipic against superstition and ignorance and the bigotry that is their offspring, the play's chief fault is that its fire remains within it and does not communicate itself to its auditors. It has a powerful theme and its

general direction by Jed Harris and some of its acting have an internal power as well but little energy comes out of it, as in the case of a powerhouse operating at full blast in a preliminary test and as yet with no outside connection. At one point in its second act when the group of girls in the grip of hysteria shriek a repetition of their witchcraft imaginings and overcome one of their hesitant number a touch of real drama quivers across the footlights. But the rest fore and aft, while dynamic in intention, boils only within itself and gives off little external steam.

The reasons are several. Miller has been remiss in developing character of any close approximation to recognizable warm humanity and has thus denied his audience any of the necessary sympathetic contact with his two central figures, the husband and wife victims of the witch-hunt. What he has contrived are simply a pair of spokesmen who serve as sounding-boards for his theme, which is volleyed against them and returned much like a damp tennis ball. They, and in particular the persecuted husband, do their full duty by the written speeches but the effect is of two obedient actors in passionate recitation rather than of two human characters that better playwriting might have made them. One listens to them with some interest but without that measure of conviction which would result were they less tape recordings and more flesh and blood. As they stand, they give the impression of figures out of mechanical old melodrama coldly intellectualized.

A second flaw in the writing, no less than in the direction by the otherwise qualified Jed Harris, is a too great intensity in the early stages of the play which reduces the tension that should properly come later. The prologue, indeed, is so overwrought and conducted at so high a pitch that what follows, when the call is for emotional excitement and explosion, becomes fizzed out and flat, save alone for the one episode noted. The performances, in short, are previously so excessive

that, even were the play more shrewdly composed, it would take phenomenal acting, accompanied by a spectacular chariot race, dramatically to top them. And thirdly there is the matter of contemporary parallels. Though Miller has been studiously careful not to finger-point and emphasize them and is to be critically endorsed in this respect, one nonetheless gets the feeling they are his primary concern and that the concern has here and there colored his treatment of his theme not to its advantage. There is consequently an underlying air of propaganda in the play that stubbornly permeates it for all the author's wish that it should not and, as with propaganda drama in the aggregate, the result is discommodious.

It is discommodious because what are unquestionably designed as parallels are not always rational parallels. It may be wholly true that what are currently referred to as political witch-hunts now and then proceed from mass hysteria and are grounded in fear, and also that they are sometimes cruel, irresponsible and deplorable. But the author's hoped for parallel between the Salem of 1692 and conditions today bogs down when the consideration extends to religious superstition and ecclesiasticism. This may be drawing the line pretty fine, since there are other points well taken, but there is a considerable difference between persecution based on ignorant superstition and prosecution, however extremely and at times eccentrically conducted, in time of national peril. The general dramatic idea may be valid but particularized analysis devitalizes it.

The realest figure in the play is that created by Walter Hampden as the deputy-governor who presides at the protagonist's trial. With his thorough grounding in the old-time school of acting, he brings to the role precisely those qualities that, while they would seem ham in a play laid in modern times, are perfectly suited to one like this laid in a long past

era. Fred Stewart is also acceptable as the pivotal church bigot, and two or three others, among them the young Jenny Egan when you can make out what she is talking about in her hysterical scenes, are commendable. But both Arthur Kennedy and Beatrice Straight, who have the roles of the hounded married couple, present all the attributes of marionettes save only the energizing wires, though the impression may conceivably be the fault of the direction.

As Strindberg was the most positive influence on O'Neill so Ibsen is the most positive on Miller. O'Neill as a consequence was primarily interested in analyzing the grinding effect of those emotions of man and woman that lie below the calmer surface emotions; Miller as a consequence is primarily interested in man's sociological aspects. Above all, O'Neill as a dramatist was concerned with character, whereas Miller seems in large part to be concerned with theme and with character only incidentally. Though in his worthy *Death Of A Salesman* he achieved character, it still and nevertheless occasionally had the effect of being inserted into his theme rather than emerging naturally and easily out of it; and in this latest play we find all theme and no character. His people are ventriloquial spokesmen for him, not for themselves. They possess humanity, when they possess it at all, only in the distant sense that a phonograph recording of it does. They speak and act at an obvious turning of his crank. And the result is a play impressive as a lecture may be impressive but for the major part equally remote from the listener's heart and feeling. It may be, of course, that he thought he had worked out his thesis in terms of character and so would insinuate it into an audience's emotions. That I can not tell. But, if he did, he has failed. And if, on the other hand, he believed that the sheer vitality of his theme would satisfactorily infiltrate itself in his audience independent of any recognizable and pulsing character to assist it, he has not yet sufficiently educated himself in dramatic eccentricity.

*The Crucible*, in sum, is an honorable sermon on a vital subject that misses because the sting implicit in it has been disinfected with an editorial tincture, because it does not succeed in ridding itself of dialectic chill and in resolving itself, for all its fury, into even the mild fever of affecting drama, and because, though it contains the potential deep vibrations of life, it reduces them to mere superficial tremors.

### Tennessee Williams

In extenuation of his chaotic new play, *Camino Real*, Tennessee Williams quotes the familiar remark, "A poem should not mean, but be." In other words, that poetry is its own reason and excuse and that it is not necessary for it to convey anything more than its own music. This may be all very well in so far as poetry is concerned but, since what Williams has written bears very little resemblance either to a poem or to poetry much above the grade of something like Piscator's lunatic stew, *Hooray, We're Alive!*, of pre-war Berlin, his quotation scarcely suits the present circumstances.

It isn't, however, that the play, despite the indignation of such macaroni as demand readily assimilable plots, does not mean anything whatsoever. Its fault is that it has meaning only in very widely separated and isolated brief scenes and that the bits of meaning are inundated fore and aft by so much that is utterly meaningless that the whole has the air of signifying little or nothing. The author's aim probably was a kind of philosophical, emotional, impressionistic, expressionistic, symbolic and poetical charade picturing bewildered mankind's search for values down the ages and its discovery in defeat that all is dross save what lies romantically deep in the human heart. But the achievement, alas, is only an infinitely more bewildered, highflown and exhausting minstrel show with thirty-six end-men (that is the number of charac-

ters) nine-tenths of whom seem to be in entirely dissimilar shows, who make cracks none of the others can understand, and who are presided over by an interlocutor in the person of Williams whose too many pre-performance drinks have gone to his head.

"Poetry," says Carl Sandburg, "is a lot of language to be marked 'Fragile, Handle With Care' and you got to know how to wrap it up and where it goes." Williams, though he appears to consider himself a poet, not only does not know how to wrap it up but does not give the slightest indication that he knows where it goes.

The literary and dramatic influences on him are here readily discernible, but his reaction to them has been so indiscriminate that he offers the impression of a youngster running wild in a delicatessen and gorging himself on such a variety of foods that he comes down with a severe bellyache, which is his play. He has wolfed Gertrude Stein's sounds and rhythms theory, Cocteau's symbolic phantasmagoria, Proust's perfumed perversion, Wedekind's philosophy of love and sex, Strindberg's technique of nightmare, Kaiser's panoramic expressionism, and Saroyan's left-handed wistfulness, and the resultant indigestion has produced nothing more lucid than the bowel disturbance aforesaid. And the exhibit that has come out of it is accordingly a woefully confused revue in which one has small difficulty detecting bits and pieces of Cocteau's *Orphée* and *The Infernal Machine*, Wedekind's *Earth Spirit* and *Pandora's Box*, Strindberg's *Spook Sonata* and *Dance Of Death*, Saroyan's *Jim Dandy*, Stein's *Four Saints In Three Acts*, and Kaiser's *From Morn 'Til Midnight* and *Gas*, with some added lyrics of despair by Sartre.

Perhaps one episode, paraphrased in a fashion from Cocteau, will give you an idea of the functioning of what Williams evidently flatters himself is acceptable symbolic imagination. A former prize-fighter with a serious cardiac condition

dies while shadow-boxing. His corpse is left lying on the ground, since the rubbish collectors who have collected the other dead bodies now fail to do their job. While the corpse is still lying there, an experimental surgeon performs at a distance an operation on the body which, he says, has been retrieved from the dump where the rubbish collectors deposited it and extracts from it a large golden heart, whereupon the corpse jumps up from the ground as big as life, seizes the heart and rushes into a pawn-shop to sell it. There may conceivably be a faint glimmer of symbolic sense here but it is so dim and is so imbedded in rupturous strain that, lacking in any poetic expression, the scene reminds one of little other than the old burlesque act in which the German comedian was hit over the head with a bladder by the Irish comic, fell prostrate on the floor and was thought to have expired until he suddenly sat again, extracted a blutwurst from his pantaloons, dipped it into a side-pocket full of mustard, and started biting off large chunks.

The chief complaint against the play, however, is not that it doesn't make sense but that it impertinently tries to pass off nonsense for sense. It asks us to suspend our credulity, which is fair enough, but rewards the suspension by thumbing its nose at us for having done so. I present one example out of many. There is a stairway leading up and out to what we are invited to imagine is an existence potentially warmer, better and happier than the mercilessly bitter and cold one depicted in the scene of the play's immediate action. Yet when the central figure of the play finally mounts the stairs in his escape into warm, romantic blessedness he finds it necessary to take with him a pair of snowshoes. It may all be clear to Williams, which I seriously doubt, but if it is any symbolism he has in mind he should be instructed that, unless symbolism is to some degree founded on rationality, it is bound to be as dubious as a child's crayon sketch of a doughnut which he

loudly insists to his parents is an Egyptian moon.

Elia Kazan, working in Lemuel Ayers' setting of a plaza in an unidentified Latin locality and in an atmosphere stipulated as being out of time, has staged and directed the none-such with a great deal of exterior brilliance and has probably done as much as anyone could do to make the whole thing pass for something more significant than it is, and he has got hold of a generally able acting squad to try to help him in the deception. Eli Wallach is thoroughly expedient as the American pug who finds himself in the loonybin, and Joseph Anthony as Casanova, Hurd Hatfield as the poet Byron, Jo Van Fleet as Dumas' Lady of the Camellias, Barbara Baxley as a recurrently virginal hoochie-koochie dancer and Jennie Goldstein as her gypsy mother who operates a call house (if you imagine I am being facetious and am describing the cast of *Hellzapoppin'*, you are wrong) are all meritorious. It's a big night, in a word, for all those who think Harry Thaw was Socrates.

## APPENDIX

THE WEAKNESS of much of American comedy writing is that it feels it imperative to be funny all the time. The best comedy is under no such delusion, since it appreciates that steady hilarity is a requisite of farce whereas reputable comedy demands its leaven of seriousness.

\* \* \*

John van Druten is one of the meagre handful operating locally as dramatists who writes plays instead of merely concocting them. Whatever anyone may or may not think of some of his work dramatically, the fact of his talent with the pen must remain obvious. There was a period when playwriting was believed to have much less connection with writing than with the theoretically mysterious craft of dramatic architecture and when carpenters were venerated above men with some literary ability, but times have changed for the better. Though there are still some critical throwbacks, the man who, like van Druten, does not view the drama as largely a cunning manipulation of children's blocks has gained an increased respect.

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What William Saroyan, who has dashed off at least five or six plays lately that have been found to be not in proper shape for production, needs is a collaborating hand. It seems that he is utterly incapable of rewriting a script once he has finished it, or perhaps it is better to say that he is either unwilling or too indolent to consider the task. I give an example. When, several

years ago, a play of his called *Don't Go Away Mad* was tried out in a small off-Broadway theatre, it failed of effect because he forgot to introduce his main character until the second act. He asked me what he could do to rectify the matter and, since the play was laid throughout in a hospital, I suggested to him that, in order that the audience might get acquainted with the character, he bring him on at the curtain's rise in the waiting-room scene of the first act, plump him down in a chair, have one of the nurses aimlessly wandering in and out stick a thermometer into his mouth, and just let him sit there. Nothing more. The curiosity of an audience as to his identity would doubtless turn the trick. "Fine!" exclaimed Saroyan. "I'll do it, because I won't have to write a single line of dialogue for him." But even the writing of the simple stage direction about the thermometer was too much for him; he never did anything more about it; and so still another of his possibly available scripts remains among his shirts and socks in his dresser drawer.

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The pistol and profanity drama, an example of which was Arthur Carter's *The Number*, no longer has a place in even the lower reaches of the theatre. The blood and thunder of other days has become the thud and blunder of these. The old galvanizing physical violence has given way to mere conversational violence, and the effect of the plays is of the slow and straining pulling of a champagne cork, the belated loud pop, and the pouring out of the bottle of faucet water.

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Many of the jobs performed on ailing Broadway play scripts by summoned play doctors hint at the manner of the old Paul Armstrong-Wilson Mizner collaborations. Armstrong would write a play on his own and Mizner, who knew little or nothing of dramatic construction but who had a gift for dialogue of sorts,

would then go to work on it. Where Armstrong, who was inclined toward the florid, would pen some such line as, "I have the honor to denounce you as a scurrilous creature not fit to show your degraded face in the purlieus of virtue and decency," Mizner would smear it out with his current girl's mascara pencil and substitute something more directly to the point like "Scram, you mangy crocodile!" And when he horrifiedly encountered anything in the Armstrong script like "Your indignation provides you with an aspect closely resembling that of a man who is afflicted with a chronic case of jungle fever," Mizner would again grab the pencil and make it read, "You foam at the mouth like a cream-puff."

\* \* \*

Maxwell Anderson's *Barefoot In Athens*, which treated of Socrates, again demonstrated that, save a dramatist have skill of a very high order, the greater the size of a character the greater inevitably will be the play's seeming triviality. It is for this reason that most of the later day plays dealing with historical notabilities have been little more than actors' adventures with the makeup-box supplemented by playwrights' researches in various popular *Lives* and *Familiar Quotations*. The figures are not so much revivified as restuffed, and the consequence is plays that re-create a great personage infinitely less than they reduce him to the stature of a histrionic mountebank.

\* \* \*

Anita Loos' gift for interpreting the young female of the species—on this occasion with a liberal assist from the Gallic Colette—is again observable in *Gigi*. Shrewder than most Americans writing for the stage today are her explorations of such a creature's mind or substitute therefor, whether the little one be of high station, middle, or none. She is bamboozled neither by romance nor disillusion, neither by inno-

cence nor sophistication, at least as such things are understood by the majority of her contemporaries, and prefers to frisk about in the significant territory that lies between the extremes, and to do the frisking with a critical wink.

When Mencken and I were editing magazines, there was a time when Miss Loos was bent on writing seriously on solemn subjects and inclined to forgo her humorous talents. She wrote, and we published, at least one such piece of fiction which was an excellent job, and we encouraged her to pursue her ability in that direction. But though she didn't and though she preferred to return to comedy, it remains clear that her humor is grounded on a fundamentally serious understanding of character, which gives it its quality of recognition and basic truth. It is often observed that, when it came to women, young or old, Clyde Fitch was an expert. Fitch, compared with Vincent Lawrence in his day or, if in lesser relative degree, Miss Loos in this, was a baby with a rattle.

\* \* \*

The weakness of nine out of ten murder mystery plays lies in their solutions. After the plays have dawdled along for a couple of hours the authors, possessed of a sudden sagacity, conclude that it is high time to provide an audience with a dénouement, which often finds them at their wits' end and at a loss how credibly to tie up their loose threads and send it home with at least passable explanations of their dramatic cross-word puzzles. In this oppressive situation they usually drown in their own sweat, as the Messrs. Lindsey and Crouse have in the case of their *Remains To Be Seen* when they indulge in the subterfuge of bringing in the Japanese manservant of the murdered man, who speaks so rapidly and unintelligibly that no one can make out his explanation, and, to top him, the Russian mistress of the man, who speaks a jargon even more indecipherable. And, to make doubly sure that no one can catch onto their lack of any invention, they

meanwhile ring enough telephone bells to greet the New Year and cause their cross-examining police to roar so loudly that, even if the Japanese and Russian characters spoke crystal-clear English, no one could hear them.

\* \* \*

I pray that I have seen the last of the plays about the man who years later encounters the woman with whom he once enjoyed an affair and finds himself still in love with her, the woman's offspring by the man of which he has hitherto been unaware, his growing fondness for the child and, for extra thick measure, his affection and solicitude for the woman's child by a subsequent marriage.

\* \* \*

It is sufficiently known to anyone with an imagination somewhat more expansive than an ability to discern the outline of a man's face in the moon that the reading of a play very often is more gratifying and more productive of fanciful pleasure than seeing it performed on a stage, where the limitations of actors, scenery, lights, etc., frequently minimize its complete and proper realization and where the imagination of the spectator is severely bounded. While I ordinarily do not like anyone to read to me, since it is in a small way an approach to a stage presentation and similarly imposes a degree of limitation, it nevertheless has its at least relative merits, and in this sense and degree the Drama Quartette's reading of Shaw's *Don Juan In Hell* is an acceptable change from the established theatrical order. The late Readers' Theatre attempted much the same thing, but was a failure for several reasons. Its company were poor readers; the direction imposed upon the readers, or rather reciters, a lot of uncomfortable, extrinsic business that made matters worse; and instead of encouraging the auditors' imagination it accordingly stifled it as it would have been stifled by a company of incompetent stage actors.

But the Messrs. Laughton, Hardwicke and Boyer and Miss Moorhead are admirable readers and excellent reader-actors, and that is the difference.

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The conversational nature of many tedious modern comedies reminds us forcefully of Don Herold's description of conversation as the slowest form of human communication.

\* \* \*

The average comedy gives its auditors too much of too little; it asks them to contribute nothing on their own but their ears, and wears out the ears. It believes that every dialogue sequence and every situation has to be written out to the full and that nothing must be left unsaid or undone. The consequence is that, to rephrase Benjamin Franklin, its conversation does not show the minute hand but strikes the hour very correctly, and that its situations exhaust themselves and their audience long before the telephone again rings or the maid again breaks them up with her otherwise wholly unnecessary reappearance. Ellipsis is a word the playwrights have apparently never heard.

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If things continue the way they have been going lately, the newspaper morgues are destined to become the repository of a voluptuous misinformation for future seekers of dramatic, theatrical and general entertainment facts. In the recent weeks alone I have noted in one or another of the reviewing and amusement columns such items, among eleven others, as the following:

"The first play at the Empire Theatre was David Belasco's *The Girl I Left Behind Me*." (The play was originally Franklin Fyles' and was merely collaborated on by Belasco.)

"What is put out to be really hot French stuff is the movie,

*La Ronde*. But, viewing it, I came to the conclusion that this much-vaunted Gallic sophistication is strictly kid stuff. The French have never grown up emotionally or sexually." (*La Ronde*, or *Reigen*, was written by the late Arthur Schnitzler, a Viennese, and was banned in his own Austria and in Italy, Germany and the United States on the ground of its too excessive sophistication.)

"The English playwright, Edward Knoblock, author of *Kismet*, etc." (Knoblock, né Knoblauch, was an American born in New York, and was naturalized as a British subject only in his middle forties.)

"Suicide as a dramatic climax is inevitably and always has been the recourse and mark of the amateur playwright." (As for example, Shakespeare, Ibsen, *et al?*)

"Plays about the theatre and theatre people are generally failures before they even open." (This should come as a surprise to the successful authors of *Trelawney Of The Wells*, *The Torch-Bearers*, *The Royal Family*, *David Garrick*, *Stage Door*, and various other such plays.)

"Charles Hoyt, the famous writer of farces, originated in America the play of political satire." (It was originated in the eighteenth century by the American Mrs. Mercy Warren.)

"David Warfield's career began in burlesque." (It began in melodrama in *Siberia* and *The Ticket-of-Leave Man*.)

\* \* \*

Playwrights who rely upon occasional snappy lines of dialogue to invigorate the prevailing poverty of their scripts, though they may contrive to evoke momentary titters, succeed only in lending to their exhibits the air of a dinner party at which the host attempts to conceal the deficiency in edible foods and interesting conversation by secreting trick little rubber squeeze-balls under the plates and popping them off the table into the guests' laps whenever things become too dreary.

\* \* \*

Some of our playwrights who have nothing to say but say it confidently in endless dialogic repetition have the appearance of as many metronomes looking admiringly at themselves in a mirror.

\* \* \*

Tennessee Williams grantedly has some gifts but it is his misfortune that he chooses to lose them in the marshes of either juvenile or borrowed and ill-assimilated philosophies on life, sex and whatnot and to make them, pleasant enough though they might be if he left them alone, take on the appearance of left-over tinsel on a wilted Christmas tree. If only he will stop thinking, or what he considers to be thinking, and simply feel, he will be a better playwright. Unable at times to disentangle his arbitrarily knotted dramaturgical and pseudo-philosophical threads, he finds himself enmeshed like a helpless and squirming fly in the web of his own making and mistakes his writhings to get out for poetic writhings of his characters.

\* \* \*

Of all revivals one of a mystery play is the most profitless and foolish, that is, unless the producer banks solely on customers who have never before seen it. If he hopes to interest people who have already seen it, he offers himself in the light of a business man who opens a woolen muffler shop in the tropics, since it is pretty difficult to figure out how anyone who knows the solution of the play's riddle, which is its chief suspensive asset, can possibly find any renewed fascination in it. Such was the recent hapless case with Mary Roberts Rinehart's and Avery Hopwood's *The Bat*. When the play was originally put on many years ago, it provided lively entertainment and was a great success mostly on the score of the complete novelty and surprise of its dénouement. This was recognized by Hopwood who was mainly responsible for the dramatization of Mrs.

Rinehart's novel from which the show was brewed. "It's that final jolt and shock in the spectators' discovery that the seeming detective is actually the criminal that makes the play," he once told me. "All the rest is just preliminary skirmishing and, if the ending were less original and ingenious, the whole wouldn't be worth a quarter at the box-office."

He was entirely right, since aside from one or two good inventive tricks that whole is laborious going, involving as it does, among other things, the most enervating low comedy servant girl that figured in even the late May Vokes' extensive career of enervating low comedy servant girls. And, to anyone attending the play for a second time, its general effect is like getting into a taxi in a strange city, instructing the cabby to take you to a certain destination, and having the swindler drive you all around town for a couple of hours only to deposit you eventually right next door to where you started. It was correctly to be suspected, moreover, that the show would not prove particularly interesting even to an audience looking at it for the first time, since nothing stales quite so quickly as a mystery play. What once was stimulating has usually had the edge taken off it by subsequent plays, motion pictures and stories that have more or less repeated its materials and it was more than likely such an audience would be on to everything and hence bored. The contemporary audience in such a case is not from Missouri but still lives there. It does not demand to be shown; it already has been shown, all too often.

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The critics' impassioned pleas for imagination in our playwrights have inspired a recognizable number of them, mostly the younger in years, to a more or less desperate acquiescence and to a determination to be imaginative whether or not they possess even the slightest symptom of the attribute. In this juncture they resort to all kinds of devices to suggest an imagination that is largely nonexistent in them and apply exter-

nally to their plays such fanciful makeshifts as soft incidental music, dreamy stage settings, actresses with faces covered with chalk and in diaphanous dresses to imply an ethereality they naturally are wholly without, and occasional, inserted pseudo-lyrical lines of dialogue in an effort to lend to their prosaic endeavors an air of heavenly flight. They do not appreciate that imagination is an internal dramatic quality, that it must be of the very essence of their work, and that it is a fore- rather than an after-thought, the bubbling spring rather than the cup in which the waters are served. Nor do they seem to realize that there can be as much imagination in a play laid in a miserable slum as in one laid among the roses of Carcassonne.

\* \* \*

The play in which an attractive elderly buck loses the young girl who has been drawn to him to the more youthful rival for her affections does not stand much of a chance any longer. Just why this should be so, I do not exactly know; but that it is so the box-office has shown many signs. Perhaps it is because the older order of things in which youth was inexorably drawn to youth has become altogether too theatrically routine and mildewed and audiences arbitrarily want something a little newer and fresher. Maybe it is because audiences in these later years are more and more composed of older men—the younger ones, not having the money for high-priced theatre tickets, go to the movies or spend their evenings drinking Coca-Cola and necking—and because these older boys want to be flattered that they are still in the ring. Or possibly it is because the great majority of the reviewers will never see fifty again, get a large satisfaction from having their vanity salved by spectacles of age's romantic triumph over youth, reserve their favorable notices for them and are upset when playwrights put them in their rightful place. But,

whatever it may be, it's it, and woe betide any play, unless it has a whole lot else, that dares not to tickle their egos.

\* \* \*

The American drama in these years of the Fifties even at its very best has in none of its manifestations anything of the poetic imagination and literary music of an O'Casey, or of the combined tragic imagination and dramaturgical skill of an O'Neill, or of the satirical deftness of a George Birmingham, or of the wisdom, wit and originality of a Giraudoux. But it probably ranks the world in its occasional richness of healthy, broad humor.

## SAMPLE BRITISH IMPORTS

*Christopher Fry*

CHRISTOPHER FRY, the English wonderchild, has afforded us sufficient proof that he is in greater part an honest playwright, but that has not prevented him from being also a pretty slick showman. It begins to appear, indeed, that when it comes to crafty showmen these days one has to look in the last place one would expect to, which is to say among those theoretically aloof and unworldly creatures, the poets. It is the supposedly soulful fellows like T. S. Eliot who seem to be wise to the ways and means to beguile the bourgeoisie and yet at the same time preserve the sanctity of their position among the literary elect. They appear to be able to give cards and spades to some of their allegedly more cunning brothers in the showshop and still beat them at their own game.

Fry, who has reaped a tidy penny, and deservedly, from the theatre with his earlier verse plays, ever conscious of the value of what may have a semblance of novelty now comes forth with what he announces as "a play to be acted in churches." (I leave it to the colleagues to manufacture learned pieces out of the encyclopedias and other reference books pointing out, unnecessarily, that the Mysteries and Miracle plays of the Middle Ages were also designed for churches and, of course, as if everyone didn't already know it, that the church was one of the cradles of drama.) Fry's exhibit is named *A Sleep Of Prisoners*, has been acted in several churches in England, and was performed here in St. James' Episcopal church on upper Madison Avenue. Though it deals with four prisoners of war who are lodged in

a house of God and thus superficially would seem correctly suited to performance in a church, there is, however, no more real reason why the play should be acted in a church than why one like *Marie-Odile*, in which a stray girl is lodged in a convent, should have been acted in a convent, an idea that even Belasco, that arch-showman, would have gagged at. If, simply because a play concerns itself with the church it is properly fitted to performance in a church rather than in a theatre, Björnson's *Beyond Human Power*, to name just one, should rightly be out of place on the stage. Fry, however, is privy to the business of getting people to talk.

What with the so-called arena playhouses mushrooming throughout the country, the summer rural enterprises increasing their annual operations and plays being presented in churches, it probably will not be long before the one-time "let's go to the theatre" will be supplanted by "let's go to the livery stable, hotel ball-room, barn, or chapel." It is one thing, as I see it, to convert a former car repository like the Winter Garden into a theatre, but it is quite another, as I do not see it, to convert a church like St. James' into one. And I hope not to hear another word from the encyclopedia ghouls; this is the twentieth century not the fifteenth, and it's a different world.

Fry's play is a parable of sorts, involving dream improvisations of the violent Biblical stories of Cain and Abel, David and Absalom, and Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, wherein the prisoners meditate their plight in the present fiery furnace of humanity and are ultimately brought to the conclusion that only through faith and fortitude is survival possible. It is, though illuminated by flashes of Fry's characteristically expert writing, repetitious, muddled and, if the truth be told, pretty tedious. Nor is the tedium in any way alleviated by having to sit without interruption for almost two hours on the rigorous architecture of an ecclesiastical bench.

The play also misses in other particulars. Though I have no doubt it was clear to its author, even if he seems to have had some difficulty explaining the clarity in his published dispatches to his audiences, it persists in remaining badly confused in the actual performance. The coalescent dreams of the soldiers, who slide in and out of their bunks as if they were doing the old Indian basket trick, have less the sense of dreams than what is presented as the live and awake action, and furthermore, though they may be correct in Fry's dramatic purpose, repeat their content to the point of an exhausting monotony. And instead of converging finally into an impressive message of hope, as was the author's intention, the effect, for all some noble verbiage, is of a studied happy ending illogically pinned onto the tail of the evening. The play, in short, is better read than seen. Far from assisting its atmosphere, church production imposes upon it certain added handicaps. One is here invited, it must be remembered, to go to a church not to worship but to see a play. That the play is performed in a church does not rid an audience of its theatrical prejudice and impulse, and the result is consequently neither flesh nor fowl. Though the direction of Michael MacOwan was commendable, except for an occasional ear-deafening roar and rant on the part of the actors, the incongruity of fisticuffs and wrestling matches in a chancel, the hocus-pocus of bunk appearances and disappearances that seem more appropriate to a vaudeville magician's show, and the threshing of the straw on the floor of the chancel that sets up a loud sneezing among the down front pew occupants were and are hardly conducive to the mood Fry hoped for. That mood was achieved immensely better by the production of *The Miracle* in the Century Theatre, by the production of *Murder In The Cathedral* in the Ritz, by productions of plays like *Everyman*, *The Servant In The House* and *Shadow And Substance* in the theatres of Broadway. You can not arbitrarily establish a mood simply by putting on a play in a church any

more than you could by putting on a sermon in the Roxy. Showmanship would appear to have its limits.

If, in sum and in conclusion, Fry wished his play to be performed in churches rather than in theatres, that was his privilege. But though, as I have said, I can understand the barnumship that motivated the decision, I must remain skeptical of the result. Simply because the play deals, as noted, with four prisoners of war confined in a church used as a jail in a bombing crisis there is, it seems to me, no more honest reason why it should logically be acted in a church than why a play like, for example, *He Who Gets Slapped*, which deals with a circus and circus people, should be acted in a tent. A church, even though it might conceivably impose the desired mood upon it, by its very nature must impose it extrinsically, untheatrically and to some degree undramatically. One is made altogether too conscious of the atmosphere of the church itself at the expense of the church which figures in Fry's script, and the distracting effect is somewhat akin to that which at the other extreme might be experienced in seeing a play laid in an amusement park performed in an amusement park. When a play is performed in a theatre, the theatre itself vanishes from the consciousness by virtue of the routine and accustomed suspension of judgment. When performed in a church, the church itself remains persistently and emphatically in one's consciousness and does not give way to the play. If Fry's reply is that is exactly what he intended, I reply in turn that, except at its very end, his play is compounded of what are basically theatrical elements, as theatrical in their way, indeed, as the elements of a play like *The Servant In The House*, and that there is accordingly no more sense in his theory than there would be in believing that the mood of such a play as Kennedy's and one's reaction to it would be integrated and heightened by acting it in a chapel.

There is still another reason why a stage production of *A Sleep Of Prisoners* would be more commodious than a

chancel production. It is that the architecture of a theatre would serve the play more conveniently than that of a church, if only for the fact that whereas a church disturbs the illusion of Fry's church within the church, a theatre would permit the illusion free from any such interposed hurdle. I may, true enough, be exceptional, but I never could be fully persuaded in Reinhardt's famous old Redoutensaal that, whatever the play, I was not just waiting for the next dance in a palace ball-room, nor can I yet be made any more hospitable to a play laid in a church and therefore acted in a church than to eating a dinner cooked in a kitchen served in the kitchen.

A second Fry import, *Venus Observed*, is a commissioned play—it was ordered from the author by Laurence Olivier for his use as a London starring vehicle—and it shows it. It has the air of a job rather than of any free and natural inspiration. Fry, of course, is so talented a writer that, even though the feeling is of a manufactured product, his gifts nevertheless occasionally assert themselves, but the work on the whole seems forced and there are many signs in it of a tired and here and there even desperate recourse to the things that have figured with original success in some of his other plays, notably and above all in his admirable *The Lady's Not For Burning*. And self-imitation has taken its toll.

The story at bottom is the tried-and-true one of the charming, middle-aged man who gives over the young woman he has come to love, with a wistful show of resignation and magnanimity, to a younger rival. No matter. It is not the story that is at fault—Fry has figged it out with some devices that here and there lend it a semblance of freshness—it is rather the treatment, which indicates his weariness in its repetitious reliance on his various old tricks of language and expression, to say nothing of in the wan quality of its humor. We thus get again a warmed-over, extended rhetorical cataloguing, as in lines like "Lemon, amber, umber, bronze and brass, oxblood, damson, crimson, scalding scarlet, black cedar, and the wil-

low's yellow fall to grace." And the whimsical use of strange words like "operculated," "lithontriptical," "eschatological," and "supercherify." And such forced, alliterative phrases as "equine equability" and such tricky antithetical as "mute as we're mutable," "unrevealing revelation" and "scrutinize the inscrutable." Also again laboriously indulged in are the punnings such as "long innings and splendid outings"; such punctuational imagery as "like a sudden swerving parenthesis; such grammatical tidbits as "Who but me—I—whichever it is"; such distilled Elizabethan as "you strapping, ice-cold, donkey-witted douche of tasteless water"; and such expeditions into the thesaurus as "the unsightly, the gimcrack, the tedious, the hideous, the spurious, the harmful." Let alone such self-congratulatory asides as "Is that not rather good?"; the humorous use of Latin as in "*muscari comosum monstrosum*," and "*scrophularia nodosa*"; and the rest of the familiar Fry literary delicatessen.

The humor is often even more visibly off the dusty shelf. Samples: 1. "That was a bit below—I'm wearing no belt—the navel." 2. "Solitary confinement, the cat-o'-nine-tails, your Aunt Florence." 3. "Everything will be pleasant: the east wind, smoking fires, revolution, debility." 4. "He was caught red-handed with the silver, and his Grace, being short of staff at the time, asked him to stay and clean it." 5. "A small South American lizard called Faithful." 6. "Even the usually phlegmatic owls care a hoot or two." 7. "You want to behave like skeletons in my cupboard"—"Not Jessie, her weight is all against it" 8. "All I saw was the tip of a fin, which might have been finan haddy." 9. "There must be a joke lying about somewhere, even when the leaves are falling"—"Something about when the leaves in Eden fell?" And there is also some rather forlorn symbolism, or what seems to be symbolism, in the observatory with its inquiry into the zodiac, in the name of the heroine, Perpetua, in the setting dubbed "The Temple of the Ancient Virtues," etc. If there is—I'll be blowed if I can make

out what it is—it recalls the definition of symbolism as being often the last refuge of a despairing playwright.

But, as has been intimated, even a commissioned job can not keep a good man down, completely; and the old Fry periodically flashes in spite of himself, or maybe rather because of himself. There is surely charm, and humor too, in such passages as

“I see no end  
To the parcelling out of heaven in small beauties,  
Year after year, flocks of girls, who look  
So lately kissed by God  
They come out on the world with lips shining,  
Flocks and generations, until time  
Seems like nothing so much  
As a blinding snowstorm of virginity,  
And a man, lost in the perpetual scurry of white,  
Can only close his eyes  
In a resignation of monogamy.”

And surely vivid picture in such as

“But even I despair  
For Roderic, my husband, who really is  
The height of depth, if it doesn’t sound unkind  
To say so: not deep depth, but a level depth  
Of dullness. Once he had worn away the sheen  
Of his quite becoming boyhood, which made me fancy him,  
There was nothing to be seen in Roderic  
For mile after mile after mile, except  
A few sheeplike thoughts nibbling through the pages  
Of a shiny weekly, any number of dead pheasants,  
Partridges, pigeons, jays, and hares,  
An occasional signpost of extreme prejudice  
Marked ‘No Thoroughfare’, and the flat horizon  
Which is not so much an horizon  
As a straight ruled line beyond which one doesn’t look.”

Savory stuff, certainly. And there's more, in the young Edgar's speech about horses and dreams, in Perpetua's beautifully witty tribute to interminable sentences, again in Edgar's speech about memory and the place his beloved occupies in it, and in several others. It is then that Fry reblooms from the commissioned, arid waste and then that his play sprays the true, delightful scent of him across the footlights.

Rex Harrison and Lilli Palmer again proved themselves expert comedy players in the roles acted in London by Olivier and Heather Stannard.

### *Terence Rattigan*

TERENCE RATTIGAN has a mild, pleasant gift for humor, as he now and then has indicated in the past, but it is to be suspected that when he aspires to be even a little profound he finds himself completely at sea, and with his auditors restlessly rocking the boat. In the accordingly well-named *The Deep Blue Sea*, imported after its very considerable critical and popular success in London, he essays to probe the psyche of a middle-aged woman obsessed by love for a younger man and his equipment is notably deficient for the task. Instead of bringing anything new to the diagnosis, he simply falls back upon similar plumbings of the character in previous plays and novels and substitutes this second-hand deduction for any fresh, first-hand knowledge. He furthermore writes his echoed materials less in terms of observed life than in those of observed theatre, and the consequence is a dreary humdrum generated not alone by unimaginative and unresourceful dramaturgy but even more so by a repetition of the already much too banal.

He is also seriously troubled by the lack of even a surface ingenuity that might have made his woman character's persistent self-scrutiny, whining and nagging and feeling of be-

ing tragically sorry for herself less irritating and tedious. While it is true that an expert actress might assist him in minimizing the irritation at least to some extent, as Peggy Ashcroft is reported to have been successful in doing in the London production, Margaret Sullavan, who had the role here, brought no more to it than a routine and obvious interpretation and thus highlighted what are essentially its bare bones. Though she tried for sympathy as hard as a bogus Broadway blind beggar led by a questionable seeing-eye dog, she only betrayed the fact that the character, despite the sympathy the playwright himself clearly has for her, is so fundamentally a nuisance that the one emotional reaction the audience has to her is, in the old quip, to kick her out before she breaks its heart. It is not the problem of her love obsession that is dull; it is the woman herself.

The originality of Mr. Rattigan's mind is obliquely reflected in an interview he provided to the press before his play opened. "Criticism has been lodged against my play," he said, "because it leaves certain questions unsolved. There are a lot of questions which haven't been answered in 4,000 years. Why answer them now?" That is one sample. "We have all known people about whom it has been asked, 'What does she see in him?' and there never is an answer," he continued. That is a second. "This is not an exceptional case," he went on. "In any emotional relationship there is always a disparity of affection." Passing over as unnecessary a reply, "Is there always?" that is a third.

Speaking of his play, Mr. Rattigan remarks, "The danger is in the acceptance of it as a straight triangle play instead of a study of a woman who loves obsessively." Dismissing the fact that the character of a woman who loves obsessively has already figured in a number of triangle plays both straight and slightly crooked, we come to the so-called study of this particular specimen, which the playwright plainly believes is something in the nature of a new, serious and even scienc-

tific, psychological accomplishment. What, after his mental exertions, does he tell us? Catalogue of his revolutionary findings:

1. A woman married for seven years to a man sexually frigid will crave an outlet from one somewhat warmer.
2. She will, upon finding him, become attached to him, very.
3. If she is of ingrained romantic tendencies, she will sublimate her satisfaction as true love and will become more and more obsessed by the delusion.
4. If her looks are beginning markedly to fade and she becomes conscious of her advancing years, she will be terrified at the thought and prospect of losing her young prey and will be downcast when he begins to show his indifference.
5. She will dislike herself for being so hopelessly involved, particularly since her husband is a decent sort, but will be unable to extricate herself from her self-wound coils.
6. She will frequently be so dejected that the thought of self-destruction will enter her head.
7. When the young man inevitably leaves her, she will be at a loss what to do with her life and will be unhappy.

Mr. Rattigan's dramatic invention in unveiling these startling truths takes such forms as his possessive heroine's failure to achieve suicide by breathing in gas fumes from a grate because she forgot to put a shilling in the meter and the grate wouldn't work, and her final redemption—in two minutes flat—at the hands of a doctor neighbor who encourages her by buying one of her amateurish paintings and telling her that work is the best anodyne for unhappiness and that she has a lot to live for, which the audience privileges itself to doubt.

Miss Sullavan's contribution, or rather lack of it, to the exhibit has been recorded, nor were matters helped any by most

of the members of her support. James Hanley, whose directly previous efforts had been confined to British moving pictures, played the role of the cool young lover with an even colder species of acting that unfroze itself, as is not uncommon with such mediocre performers, only when afforded a drunk scene that permitted him to let go with some histrionic life, or at least what an audience accepts as it. Alan Webb, who was the husband, walked around with such starchy erectness and such chill precision in speech, evidently under the impression that he was thus handsomely delineating the character's austerity, that one got the notion he had caught the germ from Hanley's acting and was imminently about to collapse from pneumonia following a vicious cold. And the rest, except for a good bit by Felix Deebank as an obtuse friend of the lover's, equally got nowhere, this being especially true of Herbert Berghof who played the role of an illegal medico and played it with such drastically suppressed ferocity that the effect was of an alien tiger forbidden to act in the circus under Equity regulations and who was pretty damned mad about it and determined somehow to get even. The director of the hapless occasion was Frith Banbury who staged the original, successful London production. I let you draw your own conclusions, which must be several. One personal conclusion as to the whole, however, is that the endorsement of the play by the London critics as a first-rate one must have been for the same reason that other such paltry plays have often been blessed, which is to say not because the plays themselves have deserved the encomiums but simply because they have been expertly performed by favorite stage personalities. In this particular case it is difficult to make out any other ground for the complimentary notices, since all that any criticism above the grade of the kind that collects photographs of popular actresses can see in it is a second-rate paraphrase of a theatrically conventional examination of a woman's amorous psychology from which the character emerges only as an actress

performing the thoughts and emotions of a familiar stage figure rather than as the woman the author professes deeply and faithfully to dissect.

### Clemence Dane

I WOULD not bring up the matter of the local revival of the twenty-year-old Clemence Dane-Richard Addinsell play with music, *Come Of Age*, if it were not for the seeming inability of some diehards to reconcile themselves to the fact that, though they persist in considering it a work of strange and unearthly quality, it is little better than pretentious fiddle-faddle. Relating the reprieve by Death of the eighteenth century poet Chatterton that he may be given a chance in the present century to come to full emotional flower, the play is written in doggerel to a kind of sound-track musical accompaniment that gives it an aspect of Tin Pan Alley Eliot. Its hypothetically touching love story involving the young poet and a worldly woman is pulpy in its passion and illiterate in its writing; and its big cocktail party scene wherein the elderly woman, distraught over her loss of the young man's love, gets drunk the while the guests comment aciduously on the situation is suggestive of nothing quite so much as a revue sketch lampooning the T. S. Eliot work and lacking only Bert Lahr's appearance as a butler.

The play, moreover, is essentially fraudulent. The recitation by the actors of the doggerel to a musical accompaniment is a spurious device; it should, if anything, be sung, since it amounts only to the cheap Broadway species of lyrics and since the play itself is only a tawdry torch song. Of course, it is all presented in a very arty manner, but it gets no closer at any point to dramatic art than its admirers get to critical intelligence.

*Frederick Knott*

MAURICE EVANS, who has hitherto devoted himself mainly to the classic drama and hence generally eaten in inferior restaurants, has now taken a chance on providing himself with richer foods by appearing in a British box-office crime melodrama called *Dial "M" For Murder*. The thought, of course, is horrifying to those of his critics and admirers who believe with considerable firmness that any actor of position should consistently serve that position, even if his shoes no longer have soles, and that one who descends from it in any such wise as this deserves some contumelious hoots.

I can't bring myself to agree with them, entirely. It would, surely, be gratifying if an actor were resolutely to adhere to the highest dramatic standards with nary a compromise. But what with conditions as they presently are in the theatre, what with the bilious fact that only a smash hit can hope to pay off the exorbitant investment in production, what with reputable new plays so few and far between, and what with even an actor's need for the wherewithal to live, it is a little too much to ask of one of them that he serve our selfish artistic interests at the expense of his own mere existence. Better and prouder actors than Evans have indeed done just as he now is doing. Irving resorted to a meal-ticket in the murder melodrama called *The Bells* and made enough out of it to pay the way for more respectable drama. Beerbohm Tree did not hesitate to stoop to profitable crime melodrama in *Jim the Penman*, nor did Mansfield perceptibly blush to rake in some welcome chips with *Dr. Jekyll And Mr. Hyde*. And various middle-ground but esteemed actors like George Alexander and Kyrle Bellew gave themselves to Vachell didderdither and the *Raffles* kind of thing when they became hungry. The great

Salvini himself and the lesser but gifted Novelli went in on occasion for Italian melodramatic merchandise to sustain themselves and their more circumspect repertory. W. C. Fields even did movies.

Mr. Evans' vacation from repute, whatever it may lack in critical austerity, is at least a good show of its kind and is certain to reward his voluntary fall from grace. Though the more ingenious a suspense-crime play is—and Frederick Knott's is full of ingenuity—the less my patience with it, since I can think of more elevated ways to spend my time than figuring out its overly intricate ramifications and following a sleuth's tortuous analytical cerebrations, I nevertheless found myself in this instance fairly fascinated by the childish business. It is quite probable that my interest was assisted by the capable acting company and by shrewd direction, not to mention the fact that the playwright got to be so complicated at times that I couldn't make head or tail of his doings and yet was idiotically determined to do so, if without noticeable success. But that, I suppose, is part of the attraction of such juvenile shows and I guess you will share my feeling if you are equally willing to suspend your sense for a couple of hours. If, on the other hand, you are not the kind to suspend it, you can enjoy yourself speculating on some of the play's peculiarities. Why, you can ask yourself, are the husband and his wife, who is worth almost a half-million dollars, shown to be living in a small, shabby two-room-and-kitchenette flat without so much as even a part-time maid to do the household chores? Why, you can continue, has the original British script been tinkered with and the caddish lover of the cheating wife been made an American instead of an Englishman? Why are moral values so confused that an audience is requested to regard the unfaithful wife and her lover as sympathetic and even heroic characters and the husband who objects to their conduct as a blackguard, even before there is any evidence of

his subsequent evil practice? And why is the wife, convicted of murder and awaiting hanging the next day in a death cell, freely allowed to go back to her home simply because a police inspector thinks he may have uncovered some new evidence that might conceivably prove her guiltless?

But, anyway, as conceded, it is all part of the kid sport, like hitting the neighbor's boy, along with yourself, over the head with a paper bag full of water. And it passes the time, if time is that cheap in your life, and keeps your mind off such worries as why the reviewers never fail to praise any actor who plays a smooth police inspector or Scotland Yard operative and why they always gladly overlook flaws in a crime, detective or mystery play that, in any other kind of drama, they would pounce upon like terriers.

This is not to say that John Williams, always an engaging actor, wasn't all that could be asked in the inspector role; it is simply to say that any such role did not demand much of him and that it doubtless could have been played quite as effectively by any one of a dozen inferior actors—and, indeed, in the past has been. Evans was the husband who plans his wife's murder at the hands of a scoundrel whom he blackmails into the deed only to see him killed by the wife in self-defence. He gave one of those restrained performances of a villain role that always meets with an audience's favor and leads it to believe that repression is the water-mark of the true acting art, and that doubly convinces it of the fact when the actor forgoes it in the last moments of a play and intimates he is a thorough expert in all phases of the art by letting go with some contrasting old-fashioned ham pyrotechnics. If, accordingly, you are still in the embryonic cultural stage where you are infatuated with the switch-on-switch-off-lights drama that proves the culprit could not possibly have come in by the garden window as the ground was muddy from the recent rains and his shoes were clean, this *Dial "M" For*

*Murder* is your anchovy.

There are, however, few men above the level of recognized morons who will frankly and without further ado admit their pleasure in crime, mystery and detective fiction, and the more they secretly relish it the more with one dodge or another they will try to explain away their taste. The protection of what they consider their culture in all other directions takes several forms. They will, for example, casually allow that they read the stuff merely for what they term relaxation, though it may be wondered where the relaxation is in a nervous immersion in and apprehensive response to gory murder, the grisly chills with which it is embroidered, and the other concomitants of exciting malfeasance, or in aggravating the mind in the following of intricate clues, counter-clues and like complexities of the fictional species. They will further apologize that the stuff is desirable for passing the time, which would seem to imply that a more elevated form of literature is unsuccessful in that respect. And they will say that there is a peculiar fascination to the stuff, as in the case of cross-word puzzles and suchlike, which in turn would argue that there isn't any in any other kind of belles-lettres.

Why such faintheads do not freely confess they are no end fetched by the grub, I wouldn't know. Though I myself am too impatient to waste hours on such nonsense, save on the uncommon occasions when it may be converted into fairly reputable diversion by a worthy literatus with his tongue in his cheek, I can nevertheless understand their more indiscriminate interest, since it simply indicates a prolongation into later life of the interest in the materials of the dime novels that enraptured them in boyhood. They are reading tots who have never grown up and to whom plot and action are the chief desiderata and by whom a spinal reaction is more cherished than a cerebral. They are the kind who, when their young offspring take them to the circus, are not interested in the

virtuosity of a trapeze performer but only in the nervously hopeful anticipation that he may slip and fall off. It is much the same with them in the case of plays, and Knott's murder thriller will doubtless pleasure them as no other such specimen has in the later seasons, since it will drive them gratifyingly delirious in trying to disentangle its industriously knotted threads. Though it gets to be so involved at moments as to be almost incoherent, it has something of the fascination of the terrifying snake in the Ambrose Bierce story that is ultimately discovered to be only a toy with glistening shoe-button eyes.

### *Hugh Hastings*

THIS, I warn you, will be a stupid interlude, at least from any substantial critical point of view. It will deal with war plays and it will state that, though there is no question the over-all batch in later years has shown a great critical improvement over the kind we got around the turn of the century and before, I somehow in my backward way confess I had more pleasure from the old lot than I have had from the majority of the newer. That it does not make sense and that anyone professing to the critical science should be ashamed of himself for admitting it is true, and since I have now gone and said it I think maybe I had better do a little explaining even if it does not at all absolve me.

There have been some good plays among the later pack and I have dutifully paid my critical respects to them. There have also been many more bad ones and I have dutifully in turn paid my critical disrespects to them. But good or bad they have with a few notable exceptions been so much of a fundamental piece that as time has passed it has become difficult to remember one from another. They seem in recollection

to have resembled so many sets of Hollywood teeth, if certainly not in like perfection at any rate in appearance, and they have been just as manufacturedly uniform and expected. If they haven't dealt in much the same manner with the ugliness and futility but heroism of war, they have dealt in much the same manner with what their authors, determined to be different and clever, have deemed to be its humorous aspects. A *What Price Glory?* has been as rare in the latter category as an *A Sound Of Hunting*, to a degree, has been in the former. Most of the rest in both categories, whatever their superficial departures from the standard patterns, have been basically repetitions or rephrasings of one another and, as such, as essentially similar as a like lot of trial dramas, mythical kingdom novels, and French fried potatoes.

Thus, if Hugh Hastings' *Seagulls Over Sorrento* refashions in an English direction the American materials of *Mister Roberts*, it comes as no surprise. Though there are bits of fairly diverting dialogue in the play, which deals with British seamen engaged in hazardous experimental doings on an island in Scapa Flow, its general aspect is too carboncopy for any re-created theatrical interest. The characters, for example, are mainly the same that have figured in earlier exhibits of the species and, while the words they speak are sometimes different, their fundamental complexion is so like that of characters we have seen before that the occasion suggests a revival more than a new play. The old salt with his cynical humor, the taciturn Scot, the rambunctious seaman, the mean-spirited petty officer, the brass, the radio operator, and the seaman given to a philosophy of sorts strut their stuff as usual, and when it is all over you groan to yourself, "Well, I've been to the theatre again," rather than beam, "I've seen something new."

When, accordingly, I remark that I experienced more theatrical pleasure from the war plays of older days, it doesn't

mean that memory is necessarily deceptive and that I recall the plays as having been better than they were, since my memory is good enough to remember most of them as having been trash. But they were at least trash that was original trash in their day and they made little pretence of being anything more. They were fresh and lively and exciting in their simple-minded way and, like newfangled toys, had as their sole aim an innocent amusement that was immensely welcome to casual theatregoing. They were as lowbrow as musical comedy and *Du Souchet* farce and they were just as much fun, whereas with a few exceptions the war plays of the years since have been neither fun nor dramatic or critical reward.

There was no "significance" to those old plays other than box-office. Instead of arguing pompously and gratuitously that war is horrible and futile, that it can be avoided only if humanity abides by Christian principles, that dictators have selfish ends in mind, and that peace in the world can be brought about only through mutual understanding, they concerned themselves only with giving a good show and left all more imposing considerations to the editorial pages of the newspapers. They showed us heroes being saved at the last moment by the arrival of the Marines (composed of fifty-cents-a-night neighbors' boys recruited by the stage managers), valiant naval lieutenants diving off the turrets of battleships to prevent secret papers from falling into the hands of spies, cannons on wheels trained on heroes and ready to blow them to bits only to have heroines rush in at the critical moment and turn them the other way 'round, and victorious troops returned from the Soudan and circling in endlessly repeated groups of the identical dozen around Trafalgar Square. And, ridiculous stuff though it was, it was amiable sport.

If these seem to be the ruminations of one in his second-childhood, so be it. But second-childhood is better than ar-

rested adulthood that finds enjoyment in the pamphlets and essays masquerading as drama that so many of the later war exhibits have been, and, after all, when it comes to war plays of real worth, let us quit all chatter and go back to the childhood of the drama, to tragedy like *The Trojan Women*, comedy like *Lysistrata*, farce-comedy like *The Acharnians*, and satire like *Peace*.

What the rest of the war plays we get in the coming seasons will be like, I do not know. But I can guess. I can guess, though I hope I guess wrong, that they will again be rewritings of the war plays we have seen at least once or twice before; that their characters will be paraphrases and duplications of the characters we have seen at least two or three times before; that their philosophies, when and if they have any, will be more or less the same as those we have heard three or four times before; and that, though in all probability they will be much more critically estimable than the old shows I have mentioned, not one of them will contain half the purely theatrical stimulation of those same critically despicable shows that gladdened my spirits before I went high-brow.

### Aimée Stuart

AIMÉE STUART's *Lace On Her Petticoat*, still another British importation, is laid in Scotland in the 1880's and concerns the friendship of two little teen-age girls, one the lonely daughter of a Marchioness, the other the daughter of a commoner, and the snobbish efforts of the mother of the former to put an end to it. Though frequently as sentimental as anything written by that nougat of yesteryear, Frances Hodgson Burnett, and though scarcely a stunning example of the progress made by playwrights in their contemplation of the young of the spe-

cies, it still in its minor way indicates some slight improvement over the old order, since for all its candied approach there is a measure of intelligence and understanding in the handling of its youthful figures. Nothing very much, to be sure, but at any rate enough to make us wincingly recall the sawdust characters that used to prevail on the stage in the guise of human offspring.

Save in the exceptional case of some European dramatist like Wedekind or Karl Schönherr, the children who were thrust upon our helpless vision were usually of the sort that brought my old partner, Mencken, exasperatedly to protest that they ought simply to be painted on the scenery and their lines spoken through holes therein by some burlesque comedian like George Bickel. They were, indeed, a preposterous lot. If they were not presented dramatically as flaxen-topped little valentines with lines that sounded as if they had been written by diabetic confectioners, they were pigtailed brats, figuring largely in rustic comedies, who disported themselves like Caucasian Topsys. Or if they were neither of these, they were immaculately laundered automata who invariably fell desperately ill in last acts and brought back errant fathers or mothers to their bedsides, there to be forgivably reunited through a mutual concern and sorrow. Those were the years when stairways were employed chiefly for the descents of children in little white nightgowns, a spectacle hypothetically so touching that audiences were kept busy wiping away what the critics of the period were given to describing as "furtive tears" and when youngsters, mainly of the female gender, were made by playwrights to wear pink or white starched dresses, fall asleep under Christmas trees and dream of a fairyland peculiarly inhabited by German acrobats, Irish comedians, and ballet dancers with legs indistinguishable from the oak trees in the woodland scene in which they customarily perspired out their performances.

For one play like, say, Avery Hopwood's *This Woman And This Man*, in which a small boy was presented with some resemblance to an actual small boy, or a comedy like Tarkington's *Seventeen*, in which youngsters were treated with some knowledge of youngsters, the American stage in particular was a stamping-ground for such caricatures as made Little Nemo and the Katzenjammer Kids seem in comparison like paragons of reality. The prevailing theory among most of our playwrights appeared to be that all children of whatever race or color were congenital idiots and that the only thing that distinguished them as faintly human was their preference for cookies to grass. Any degree of intelligence was held as being naturally as foreign to them as to a Tennessee or Georgia censor, and our stage as a consequence offered a parade of such offspring as in real life would have been promptly strangled to death by their parents, whom the courts subsequently would have congratulated on their wisdom and mercy.

There are, as intimated, some traces of the past in Mrs. Stuart's little girls, but there are, as also suggested, more indications of the improved later day approach to the young. She at least abstains from the old coos and gurgles and invests her characters with some recognizable human traits. As to her play in general, while it is of no critical consequence whatsoever and comes down in the end only to debatable trade-goods, it has touches of assuasive enough writing and, like other such British specimens, provides all the innocent and inoffensive diversion of looking at the decorations in a candy store window. The disquisitions on the snobbish social attitudes of the time have been much better handled before and the sentimental passages may at times be gagging but I suppose there are people who do not mind such things, as was proved when the play was done in London, and who am I to spoil their pleasure? (If you crave an answer to the question, I refer you for the desired explanation to my thirty-odd auto-

biographical critical treatises, obtainable at the nearest book-store, for cash.)

It occurs to me that some readers of the above animadversions on children as viewed by playwrights of the past will possibly breeze a rhubarb protesting that I have confused the roles with the youngsters who played them. Be disabused, my friends; I have done nothing of the kind. It is true that the great majority of child actors in other days were pretty frightening, but it would have taken even more scarifying ones to make me mistake the roles for them. Those roles, as I have said, were most often no more an authentic picture of children than so many dolls, rag or china, and the consequence was a cavalcade of fudges in silk and calico dripping lisps and stutters that got little nearer to human speech than their playwright concocters got to merit in any other direction.

When, however, Miss Stuart leaves off her contemplation of small fry and exercises herself in a consideration of the uppish social attitudes of the period it is to be feared that she indicates little philosophical advance over such lady potboiler novelists of the yesterdays as Georgie Sheldon, Bertha Clay and Geraldine Fleming. And no more, theatrically, than was implicit in the drama of a half-century ago wherein the aristocratic attitude was uniformly invested in a sixty-year-old character actress with her hair rigorously slapped down and parted in the middle, in a lavender dress with a lot of lace around the neck, and with the kind of vocal delivery that suggested she had just sucked a grapefruit, and wherein further the helpless commoner, usually an appetizing morsel, was so framed as a sympathetic character that the audience started crying before it could unwrap its caramels.

Miss Stuart's story has to do, as noted, with the young daughter of a lady of title who befriends the ditto of a commoner and with the determination of the former to break up the relationship. Were the story to be handled by almost anyone

other than a British female playwright, it is likely that its course would not be quite so tranquilly polite. If it came under the hands of a French playwright, for instance, the daughter of the commoner would in all probability turn out to be the illegitimate child of the aristocratic mother's late husband, thus embarrassing the proud old dame no end and reducing her to a contrite understanding of human equality. If, on the other hand, it were treated by a German, sex would be likely to rear its head and the relationship between the two youngsters would be implied to have undertones of perversion, the scene being symbolically laid in a cemetery. And if an American should engage it, one of the little girls would either be of inherited Nazi tendencies or possibly a psychopath whose condition was predicated on having been brought up on at least one of the stories of Henry James and the memoirs of Madame Blavatsky.

That there is, or at least should be, a place on our stage for plays which forgo the journalistic alarms of the moment, which echo a period when the world was relatively at peace with itself and which deal in human relationships apart from politics, physical strife and other such morbid intrusions, is plain. But the plays, to earn that place, must combine with their fleecy gentility a nimbler mind, a more substantial style, and a more ingenious invention than this of Miss Stuart's. Fine feeling demands fine writing, lest the feeling, however fine, take on the flavor of mush. Wholesomeness must be filtered through strength, lest it take on in turn the dry conventionality of an embroidered wall motto. To make the innocence of the past appealing, a playwright, in short, must have a considerable reserve of the sophistication of the present.

*Enid Bagnold*

HERMAN SHUMLIN's third successive British importation, the novelist Enid Bagnold's *Gertie*, like the previous two, *Lace On Her Petticoat* in large part and *To Dorothy, A Son* in full, was such locally doomed stuff that as on all such occasions it was the critical gesture to express wonder as to what a producer conceivably saw in it. I myself used to be a party to such speculations, but I have reformed. It is not at all difficult to figure out what fetches the producers in the case of these deadfalls. They think they are good. With that problem disposed of, the question arises as to why they think they are good. But since that seems to be a matter for psychiatrists rather than for dramatic critics I perforce leave it to them and content myself with merely a few guesses.

The first is that Glynis Johns, the British actress Mr. Shumlin brought over to star in the play, thought it was good and persuaded Mr. S. that it was. That, however, only begs the question, so we try a second guess. Mr. S. also thought *Lace On Her Petticoat* and *To Dorothy, A Son* were good and, since *Gertie* is not much poorer than they were, naturally and logically thought it too must be good. But that does not really get us anywhere either, so we will have another go. This gets us back to Miss Johns and to why she thought it was good. Things being what they are in England, Miss Johns probably thought any play that would bring her to America where one can get a square meal was not only good but pretty damned fine. Yet, while that is a reason of a sort, it doesn't get to the nub of the matter, so once again we will have to plumb things from Mr. Shumlin's point of view, which after all is more pertinent since he lives here and can get all he wants to eat by just walking around the corner.

*Gertie*, like the two other items he earlier admired and imported, calls for only one set and a small cast, seven actors to be exact. That was the same number *Lace On Her Petticoat* called for, but since *Gertie* is not, as *Lace* was, a costume play, Mr. S. doubtless considered it economically several sevenths better than *Lace*. *To Dorothy, A Son* supposedly had ten characters, but five of them could be and were played by a single actor, which reduced the cast to six and hence it in turn was obviously deemed one-seventh better than *Lace* and but a mere, negligible one-seventh more desirable than *Gertie*.

These involved mathematics, however, still do not altogether satisfactorily explain matters, so we go for yet another guess. Dismissing as untenable the theory that Mr. Shumlin read the script of *Gertie* without his glasses and thought it had something to do with Goethe, we arrive at his seeming sense of values. About seven years ago, Mr. Shumlin produced a play called *The Visitor*, which he admired enormously but which was so supremely bad that the critics flayed it unmercifully and he had to close it for lack of any general interest after a scant twenty-three performances. This so aroused his ire that he jumped into the public prints and contemptuously dismissed at least one of the offending critics not only as a numskull but as one so low in taste that he actually preferred the stuff of some Irishman or other named O'Casey to plays like *The Visitor*. This may at last give us a clue to the whole business. If it doesn't, I have no more guesses left and you will have to try to figure out the thing yourself.

I suppose that by this time you do not care to know what *Gertie* is about, so I'll tell you. It is about the shortage of eligible males in England and the consequent disconcertment of the women, one of whom is Gertie. Gertie sets out to do something about it and gets going with all her wiles when a Hollywood female talent scout somewhat perplexingly turns up in her house with a former husband, now a Broadway pro-

ducer. Gertie wheedles the producer into putting up the money for a trip to America where, as everyone knows, there are hundreds of thousands of men, most of them millionaires, just dying to get married. Gertie also persuades the producer to send her sister, who has written a play, along with her. And the curtain falls with the two girls bound for Broadway, for unheard of theatrical riches and, of course, for millionaire husbands.

We now give Mr. Shumlin the benefit of the doubt and allow that maybe he didn't really like the play but thought that in Miss Johns he had found a young actress fresh to audiences who, like June Lockhart several years before in *For Love Or Money* and Audrey Hepburn more recently in *Gigi*, might so appeal to the trade that she would draw it in whether the play was good or not. (Mr. S. after all once produced Lillian Hellman's plays, so, say what you will, he can not be altogether obtuse.) Miss Johns is a cute little trick with a considerable stage presence and some personal attraction but, however, of a deportment so placid and with a delivery so somnolent that the reaction of American theatregoers, who are given to a wholesale esteem for what is vulgarly known to them as pep, was extremely problematical. Mr. Shumlin, furthermore, assisted the doubtfulness of the response by failing to direct the company that surrounded the young lady into any contrasting liveliness which might possibly have lent the necessary feel of humor to her manner of playing. The net result was an evening that had the air of a novel being read aloud by a group of tired actors rather than of anything resembling dramatic entertainment. Miss Bagnold, of course, was also to blame. She seems not yet to have learned that it takes something more to make a play than merely ripping off the covers of a book, giving over the descriptive passages to a scene designer, and having the dialogue recited by actors who substitute walking around a stage for inner dramatic action.

### Peter Ustinov

PETER USTINOV's *The Love Of Four Colonels*, received by the London critics with much the same enthusiasm they exhibited in the case of Terence Rattigan's *The Deep Blue Sea* and other plays that have subsequently caused us to scratch our noses, again induces the skeptical itch in that abused organ. It has a few amusing episodes and some comparatively deft bits of dialogue but the bright spots are outweighed by so many more lustreless ones and the whole is so engulfed by a strain for "imagination" and for something approximating authentic fantasy that it suggests a man performing a solo tug-of-war and acquiring the resultant hernia. There are still other elements that are difficult to reconcile with the strangely favorable British view of the play. But first, in order that they may be intelligible, a brief outline of the plot materials.

The scene opens in "the offices of the Allied Military Administration in a village in the Hartz mountains, disputed by Britain, France, America and Russia after the Great War of 1939-45." Present are four colonels "charged by their governments to carry on the friction on an intimate, domestic level." Into their midst and interrupting their bickering come presently two fairies, one female and good, the other male and bad, who volunteer to escort them to the nearby castle that has been the subject of a troubled speculation amongst them and that their troops have been unable to penetrate to through the weeds which mysteriously thicken during the hours of darkness. In this magic abode, they are told, lies the Sleeping Beauty awaiting the reviving call of love.

The second and third acts bring the fairies with their military quartette to the castle, where each of the latter is set to woo the Beauty in what is whimsically purported to be his

native fashion and manner. This business consumes the major portion of the play and concludes with the defeat of all the aspirants for reasons bound up with their inherent psychological eccentricities. Yet two persist in remaining, the Frenchman and the American. They are deposited in beds, one on either side of the Beauty. Their hands reach out and almost manage to touch her. "I can't reach her," says the Frenchman, "can you?" "No, not quite," replies the American, "it was arranged like this on purpose." A pause, and then the American: "Were we wrong not to go back?" "What is the use of asking such a question?" retorts the Frenchman. "At this precise moment they are asking themselves if they were wrong not to stay." Curtain.

Now that you have a rough idea, have a glance at the ways and means employed by the playwright to propel his fable. First, the treatment of character in the instance of the four colonels. Here, were he still alive, Jerome K. Jerome would have enjoyed a romp in adding a chapter to his memorable book on stage stereotypes. Not only are the representatives of the different nations carbons of their old-time farce and musical comedy equivalents, but the words and viewpoints placed in their mouths follow closely the patterns of accepted platitude. Thus, the more or less taciturn Englishman, with pipe in contrast to the American with cigar, is given to the standard "I say, old man," "old chap," "old chum," "how very unusual" type of locution, is shocked at the thought of disobeying an order, can not understand why anyone should speak any language other than English, is slow in absorbing a joke, and comports himself on the whole after the extravagantly polite, if fumbling, manner of stage Englishmen years on end. The American in turn is given to a homely awkwardness, dutifully conducts his speech with "yeahs," "sures," "heys," "come on, fellers," "yummys," "well what do you knows," queries as to a woman's possession of "it," and so on, indulges

in cracks about Chicago gangsters, Custer's Last Stand and cigars called Cherokee Blues, and acts in the crudely homespun manner usually attributed by British playwrights to all Americans from their farmers on the one hand to their Presidents on the other, their Secretaries of the Treasury alone being tactfully excepted from the otherwise all-inclusive classification.

The Frenchman, save for an abstinence from oolalas, is similarly in essence out of the old farces and later musical lampoons. (If Ustinov had any satire in mind, he does not make his purpose sufficiently definite but rather only suggests self-satisfaction in his cleverness and exactitude of character stamping. That he has tried for comedy in the characterizations is of course plain enough, but it is comedy based on what he doubtless regarded as freshly humorous approaches to them.) He has made a perceptible effort to break at least in some measure from the Gaul stencil by refraining from the usual "mon Doos," excessive shoulder-shrugs and epileptic comportment and has further departed from the conventional swoonings whenever amour is mentioned and has had his character allow he is not a romantic but a realist. But from under the camouflage the figure emerges with most of the dabs of the old greasepaint, with the familiar philosophies on mistresses, and with such recognizable whimsies as "My wife's fidelity has always seemed to me so embarrassingly un-French."

The Russian comes in every way out of the current cartoon-box. Only the black whiskers are missing. All else is present: the diplomatic frigidity, the arbitrary objection to everything, the temperamental unpleasantness, etc. The name, moreover, is Ikonenko. Ustinov's apparent belief and hope that a considerable humor is to be extracted merely from repetitions of the already perfectly obvious and familiar are of a piece with the belief and hope that you can still make people vibrate

with amusement at what they found funny in the comic valentines of their youth.

The humorous body of the play, as before noted, consists mainly in depicting the ways the four colonels would make love to the Beauty and here, I fear, the author can manage nothing better or more imaginative than a duplication of much the same business we every now and then get in the musical revues showing how love scenes would be handled by Noel Coward, O'Neill, and some French or Russian playwright. In this case the travesties are in the manner of Chekhov, Molière, the Elizabethan drama and what Ustinov evidently regards as the current Broadway honky-tonk-tough-guy-streetwalker melodrama. All this is accompanied by by-play on the part of the Wicked Fairy, who as from dramatic time immemorial is "dying to do a good deed," and of the Good Fairy, who is "longing, just for once, to be bad." Further dialogue: Good Fairy: "Love is my friend." Wicked Fairy: "Carnal love?" Good Fairy: "Spiritual love." Wicked Fairy: "No, my dear, we don't know where we stand with love. . . . You are the conscience, I, the primitive desire. We may struggle for the heart . . . , etc., etc.

The general calibre of the wit may be suggested in an allusion to "an eunuch from the Ottoman realm" and the retort, "yea, straight from the ottoman, I'll warrant; her hair is all unkempt." The quality of the philosophy may be conveyed by such observations as "People who have never seen a bath do not want a bath. Knowledge breeds desire, and desire breeds hatred," as also by such Strindberg filchings as "Hatred is as binding a tie as love." The nature of suspensive dramatic line may be gleaned from passages like "Who opened that door?" "The wind." "Look at the trees. There's no wind today." And the effort at epigram takes such forms as "The French genius is the genius of mistrust." And what is end-product of all this mountainous cerebral striving? The molehill thought that man

reaches ever for the unattainable, that beauty is incorruptible, and that a man remains himself with the obduracy of a leopard's spots.

The large favor that Ustinov has found among the London critics is not, however, an altogether indecipherable enigma. Month after month for some years now they have been confronted, with minor exception, by such a rash of trivial comedies, nursery murder melodramas and similar fodder that when a playwright came along with at least some pretence to imagination and wit he naturally seemed to them in their state of impatience like a Santa Claus bearing something that hinted at ambrosia, and they licked their famished chops. What turned out to be mostly only peppermint candy instead of ambrosia could not entirely diminish their relish, and they contentedly accepted what they got, gladly suspending their judgment that it was not the real thing but was in the circumstances tasty enough. This is no undue reflection on the English brothers. We have on occasion seen much the same thing happen here in the case of one or two of our own playwrights, and for much the same reason. In the starvation of a desert even shredded cactus is welcome, and if a makeshift salad dressing is miraculously to be had it takes on the splendor of avocado garnished with wine-tinted Roquefort.

The first sample of Ustinov's provender to be nibbled locally, this *The Love Of Four Colonels*, though very far from a satisfactory play and one that clearly indicates that its author's ambitiousness is not matched by his competences, nevertheless has easily detectable imitations of quality that the English prevailed upon themselves to accept in lieu of the McCoy.

In the first place, the corpus of the play, which as noted deals with man's inability to triumph over his ingrained emotions, morals, prejudices and native eccentricities, is cast in the vein of fantasy, and if anything appeals to the British it is fantasy, provided only it is second-rate. The tinsel fantasy

identified with Drury Lane has long been dear to their hearts, but let anything like the first-rate kind of, say, the Irish dramatists—O'Casey is an example—come their way and they will have none of it. Ustinov's grade of fantasy, though it aims at a sophisticated, satirical humor, is actually little more than a juvenile intellectualization of the old Sleeping Beauty fable presided over by the Good Fairy and the Bad Fairy. And in the second place, there is the wit, or what masquerades as it. While the playwright offers a few samples that are not too bad, the bulk of his attempts is pretty seedy, but so thirsty are the English critics, like us, for even small relief from the prevailing drought that a faint sprinkling of it was deemed enough for parched throats. Since the English certainly know true wit when they see it, there can be no other critical explanation. To paraphrase Swift, it appears they concurred in the idea that "a very little wit is valued in a contemporary playwright, as we are pleased with a few words spoken plain by a parrot." Thus, while they might understandably endorse some such observation of Ustinov's as "We lost our illusions with our second kiss, and our third was more passionate than the first," it would otherwise be difficult to appreciate how they could properly accept such stuff as the before quoted "People who have never seen a bath do not want a bath," or "Were there no husband, the little lapses that women dote upon would lack of savor." Nor, if the case is one of broader humor, could one understand their acceptance in any degree of stuff like "There comes a time during the day when even the most strongly constituted of us has to leave the room; I'll be back in a minute," not to mention such small-time vaudeville dialogue as "I think Stalin stinks"—"I think the same of Truman."—"So do I; I'm a Republican."

What show results from this grab-all is one that has had to be superimposed on it by Rolf Gerard's scenery tricks and handsome costumes, the very engaging performances of Rex

Harrison and the lovely Lilli Palmer, and meritorious support by Stefan Schnabel, Robert Coote, and George Voskovec. It is a show, in brief, that will entertain more greatly those who enjoy the superficialities of the theatre than those who want, along with the superficialities, a little food to get their teeth into.

Ustinov has supplied only a presumptuous toothpick.

### Bernard Shaw

It has for some years now been a bleak commentary on the English-speaking stage that if it seeks any authentic wit it has to fall back upon revivals of Congreve and Sheridan, who unfortunately do not pay off as they should, of Wilde, who provided he is fitted out with acting "names" occasionally does, and above all of Shaw, who does so pretty regularly, as *Misalliance* most recently seems again to have proved. It is true that we can get a sprinkling of it from Maugham and Fry, and there are locally intermittent mild traces of it in van Druten and, when he is in good working trim, which lately has been seldom, in Behrman, but if it is a matter of the full, real article we have to hie to the graves. And of those who have haplessly departed the earth, Shaw in this day and age remains the liveliest and most theatrically trustworthy. In even this *Misalliance*, which is one of his minor exercises, there is still more witty amusement than one will presently find in combined other quarters in an entire year's playgoing.

The persistent popularity of Shaw's wit with our theatre-goers is probably grounded on two things. The first, of course, is his appreciation of the fact that wit is a risky dramatic commodity and that the box-office has a way of not responding to it as might be wished. Appreciating it, he has devised new means of selling it. One of these is to lessen any too insistently sharp bite it may possibly have by coloring it with touches of what the purists disdain as mere broad humor. In other words, a showmanship of it by allowing it its sting but superficially disinfecting the sting with a chuckle or, if and when determined that the wit be left uncontaminated and independent, embellishing it with extrinsic physical antics that minimize any uncomfortable prick it may have for some members of his audience. Shaw's technic in the general wit situation is not to explode it in an audience's face and so perhaps discommode his listeners but to prepare them for it with simpler humors that gradually lead up to it. In this respect he is like a physician who, having diagnosed the patient as one with a probable tumor, warily first deceives him that all he has is a stomachache, after a spell apprises him that it may possibly be an ulcer, then leads up to the tumor and finally lets go with the suspicion that the tumor may conceivably be a cancer. But with a deceptively reassuring look on his face.

The second, and by all odds the more significant and important thing, however, is the nature of the very foundation of the Shavian wit. Unlike such playwrights as Sheridan and Wilde and the lesser later sort, the Shaw wit is intellectual rather than social. There is in it none of the snobbishness that is the essence of these others and that remains unmistakable however much their effort to conceal it. And, to guarantee popular acceptance, the intellectual element in it is craftily made assimilable by expressing it in non-intellectual terms, or at least in terms that substitute an approximate harlequin's

costume for cap and gown. Wit has been defined as the language of smiles. Shaw has translated the smiles, which the late Charles Frohman once said spelled failure at the box-office, into laughs.

Wilde, along with such contemporary mimics of him as Noel Coward and the like, though he professed to criticize and deride fashionable society, was himself obviously enchanted by it. Since he realizes that, aside from a comparative handful of theatregoers—and you can't get rich from a handful—the great majority of people who patronize the theatre either are not interested in society apart from the expensive clothes the actors wear in such dramatic circumstances or in their ignorance of it think it has something to do with the prevention of cruelty to animals, Shaw, devoid of all snobbery, treats it, when he treats of it at all, much in the same wittily indifferent spirit that he approaches any other form of human foible, save alone socialism, vegetarianism, and money. He constitutes himself, in brief, one with his audience and his audience is profitably flattered by the camaraderie, much as any Elk is when the Grand Exalted Pontifco of the order, a former barber whom he has helped to elect to the position, deigns to call him by his first name and pat him on the back.

The innate social snobbery which Wilde went to such pains to merchant as democratic charm is obliquely reflected in such of his remarks as "Arguments are extremely vulgar, for everybody in good society (*sic*) holds exactly the same opinions," "There are only five women in London worth talking to, and two of these can't be admitted into decent society" (*sic*), and the sort. Contrast this with Shaw's "Ladies and gentlemen are permitted to have friends in the kennel but not in the kitchen," "A gentleman is a gentleman the world over; loafers differ," etc. Wilde wrote for the first five rows and the boxes of a theatre; Shaw for everybody in the house, except

maybe a few critics. It took time, true enough, for people, as the vulgar phrase is, to get him, but we should be reminded that it also took him some time to find himself. In his earlier years he said of one of his plays, "It is nothing else but didactic. Do you suppose I have gone to all this trouble to amuse the public? No, if they want that, there is the Criterion for them, the Comedy, the Garrick, and so on. My object is to instruct them!"

Allowing even for possible facetiousness, that just the same was the beginning Shaw and that was then the main Shaw intent. The Shaw who caught onto himself and onto his real gifts, the Shaw who could make people think with their funny-bones, tickle them into laughter with the steel feather of his wit, and bring them merrily into a theatre in spite of their ingrained prejudices, that Shaw, assisted of course by time's education, came later when, chancing one day to pass a bank, an idea seized him.

## SAMPLE CONTINENTAL IMPORTS

*Jean Anouilh*

BAEDEKER made the mistake of his life when he stated that the French above all things admire light wines and dancing or, if he did not make it, at least should have edited his remark in point of time. What the more modern French seem particularly to admire are plays, librettos, ballets, novels and films based on the Orpheus legend, of which there must be scores, most of them scarcely to be described as light, along with incorporated interminable clinical analyses of love which compare the hypothetically delicate emotion to a cross between melanotic cancer and smallpox and which resemble dancing solely of the St. Vitus variety. Jean Anouilh has combined both in the play known locally as *Legend Of Lovers*, which the French have taken to their bosoms as *Eurydice* and which indicates again that in the matter of alcoholic refreshment in general and terpsichore, let alone dramatic tastes, Baedeker got two nations badly mixed.

Whereas a French audience sits enthralled when Anouilh's lovers and their various assistant philosophers engage in a non-stop discourse on the tortures and agonies of amour, pausing only now and then to bestow paradoxical, passionate kisses upon one another, an American audience remains passive nigh to the border of coma. Though its patience is here further aggravated by the heavy dose of mystical gravy with which the author has saturated his play and by stage direction which has paced the dialogue with such portentous slow-

ness that the actors have the air of being imminently threatened by lockjaw, which would be a godsend, the situation is nothing new. Local audiences have never been able to induce themselves to relish these ferocious inquiries into the subject of love, even when conducted by dramatists infinitely superior to Anouilh, and thus have spelled failure for all such as Strindberg, Porte-Riche, Wedekind, and the probe-mad like.

The present plumbing of the business begins well and interestingly enough with the first meeting of the young lovers—one a dreamy and idealistic musician, the other a fly-by-night actress of indifferent morals—in a French provincial railway station, and hints at a simple, fragile and appealing story of their subsequent emotional life. But it is not long before the play starts its travels and tangles itself up in a Grand Tour of sexual and amorous problems, complicated by symbolism, metaphysics and an overexertion of the lighting switchboard, that exhausts the attendant eardrum.

Not only does the Orpheus legend usually become rather silly when retold in modern dress, but on this occasion its silliness is compounded by some of the writing and much of the staging. Though, for instance, Anouilh argues that death is happy and will bring eternal bliss to the lovers whom life has made miserable, his figure of Death who persuades them to follow him is presented both by the author and director as so sinister and acidulous a character that he would make the prospect of living on earth even with a bad case of tropho-neurotic leprosy a better and more glorious choice. The shabby hotel waiter, moreover, a difficult card to make out the one way or the other, is offered half-realistically and half-allegorically, and his frequent interruption of the lovers' tryst suggests nothing so much as the old revue sketch in which the footman every other minute pops into Marie Antoinette's bed-chamber and disturbs her rendezvous with one lover only to announce another and yet still another.

That Anouilh, many of whose plays bear a basic resemblance to one another, has a definite talent somewhere in his makeup is nevertheless plain to anyone familiar with the bulk of his work. It is a pity, however, that as in this case he can not resist burying it out of notice by heaping upon it clods of pretentiousness and the ashes of long overused sexual animadversions. Even the present play might have been made relatively impressive and acceptable had he forgone his propensity for complex autopsies and symbolic flagree and written it more simply. But no sooner has he composed a bit of valid dramatic writing than he seems to say to himself, this is altogether too unlaboried and easy to understand; people will think I am just a competent playwright; I've got to thicken it up so they'll consider me a really important one; and he thereupon proceeds to the business of thickening it up with such determination that not only can no one understand it but it becomes overblown nonsense. The process further so involves him with himself that he sometimes gets lost in the labyrinth of his own creation. Thus in this play he argues, as before noted, that only in death can love find itself beautifully realized and perpetuated, yet offers his hypothetically persuasive Death character as so sinister and depressing a figure that paradox lifts its head and whinneys. It is more or less apparent that he had in initial mind some such winning impersonation of Death as Evreinov offered in *The Merry Death* and Maugham in *Sheppery*, but the confusion which he imposes upon himself through his zeal to make complex what is essentially incomplex has bewildered him out of his intention. And the consequence is that, as his play stands, it hasn't, for all his apparent satisfaction with his peculiar brand of profundity, half the honest value of some such light-hearted inquiry into the debated cardiac emotion as Schnitzler's *Anatol*, Brieux's *Les Hennetons*, or almost any one of Vincent Lawrence's better comedies.

The acting company was headed by Dorothy McGuire and Richard Burton in the roles of the doomed cupids. Miss McGuire, despite the fact that she had dyed her brown hair a hideous taffy-blonde since she went to Hollywood and had made her erstwhile attractive person largely indistinguishable from two or three dozen other female movie dummies, and though the part and, more so, Peter Ashmore's misguided direction imposed a considerable monotony on her, acquitted herself creditably. Burton indicated an acting ability that will be happier when not handicapped by such direction, which here channeled him into an arbitrary succession of reticences and explosions that gave him the appearance of alternately aiming a Maxim silencer at his role and then swallowing the still firing revolver minus it. Hugh Griffith had himself a jamboree as the hero's lecherous old father, did everything with the role but introduce a trampoline act into it, and was amusing, if you weren't much of a critic. Edith King was properly fluttery as the heroine's miscellaneously inclined mother; Bruce Gordon looked and acted the vengeful theatre company manager as if he, or perhaps the director, thought the play to be *The Corsican Brothers*; William Smithers, equipped with such mustachios as would have made the late Franz Joseph boil with envy, acted the small role of the hotel waiter as if it were King Oedipus; and Noel William's Death substituted the routine physical rigidity and imperturbable countenance for a more logical characterization.

### *George Tabori*

*Flight Into Egypt*, the George Tabori play that for months prior to its advent was whispered *via* the grapevine to be the dramatic contribution to its season we all had been impatiently waiting for, proves only that the grapevine would better stick to its natural function of providing more relevant

fruits. Expertly mounted by Jo Mielziner, heatedly directed by Elia Kazan and in the main proficiently acted by a company headed by Paul Lukas and Gusti Huber, it constitutes a fair theatrical show, but nothing to speak of as drama of any critical standing. It is possible that a dramatist with a pen dipped into lyrical ink might have made more of it or a composer-librettist like Menotti something almost as moving as he made out of not altogether dissimilar basic materials in *The Consul*. But the literal treatment which Tabori has offered results only in the kind of play that appeared in one shape or another on the local stages thirty and forty years ago and that amounted to nothing more even in that overly hospitable critical period than plain box-office merchandise.

Digging into the dustbin, Tabori has come up again with the theme of the devoted wife who, to get the wherewithal for a desperately ailing husband and for her child, is driven to surrender her virtue to a repulsive man able to supply the needed succor. How many times the conceit has already been put through its paces by playwrights overtaxes the memory, but I should say off-hand that in a long course of theatre attendance I have been subjected to it almost as often as I have been to that of the equally devoted wife who, to free her husband from an allegedly committed crime, puts on her prettiest frock and thus so overcomes the admiration and sympathy of constituted authorities ranging in earlier days from Abraham Lincoln to, in later, Supreme Court judges, district attorneys and the actual criminals themselves that her spouse's innocence is granted and returns him at the final curtain to the embraces of the wife, their small blonde daughter, and the old Negro family retainer. Tabori contrives to get one or two serviceable, if perfectly obvious, scenes out of the venerable goods but what interest the exhibit evokes lies mainly and obliquely in a kind of theatrical necromania, that is, a morbid attraction toward dead dramatic bodies.

In the hope of bringing the dead to some present life, the

business is related in terms of Viennese war refugees, who, having got as far as Cairo on their way to America, are so long delayed in getting their visas that what money they have left is exhausted, a state of affairs which drives the wife to the anatomical sacrifice noted. To make the wife character sympathetic, indeed super-sympathetic, the playwright has stopped at nothing short of having her come down off the stage and hold hands with the audience. He has carried the thing so far, in point of fact, and Miss Huber so copiously assists him that even those in the house with hearts chilled by the shamelessness of the assault on their sensibilities have some difficulty in restraining themselves from climbing up onto the stage and taking her consolingly on their laps.

Some of the author's dialogue is not without the theatrical pungence of the species that was dispensed in another generation by such dramatists as George Broadhurst and Edward Sheldon, who in their guileless day were esteemed as "strong" writers; and Kazan, a director so gifted in converting the ordinarily placid into the extraordinarily turbulent that he could probably make a prune-whip burst out all over like a time bomb, has melodramatized not only the dialogue but the whole show so boomerangly that it seems occasionally exciting, at least to those theatregoers who easily respond to phlegmatic stuff goosed into a nervous stage life. But to others who are more particular in their tastes and more inquisitive in their heads the proceedings are not so readily swallowable. Such cursed fowl, the bane of Broadway producers and playwrights concerned only with the splendors of a shiny dollar, are capriciously inclined to be oblivious of the emotional bebop with which the surface of the play has been enlivened and to look a bit closer into its actual content. Looking, they discern that that content is little more than the essential fabric of some such old play as *Bought And Paid For*, minus Eugene Walter's aptitude for distilling some of the too palpable

greasepaint out of dialogue calculatedly theatrical, crossed with the contemporary materials of *The Consul*, in turn minus the honesty, directness and force of Menotti.

Still looking, they question the business of the wife's cession of her chastity to obtain morphine for her ailing husband instead of the more orthodox former day money as being just another added thrust at sensationalism. Looking further, they smile indulgently at their neighbors who are given to accepting the melodramatizing of the theme with the apology that we are presently living in a world of melodrama and that melodrama is consequently the core of everyone's daily life. And, meditating, their smile takes on an ironic curl. While it is true, they appreciate, that the world today is full of melodrama, the fact no more justifies the arbitrary melodramatization of drama that properly and artistically calls for less violent treatment than a peaceful and tranquil world would justify a complete dismissal of properly and soundly melodramatic drama. It is not melodrama that anyone objects to, but melodrama plainly resorted to for the transparent purpose of syringing turpentine into characters, situations and dialogue that would otherwise naturally droop and fail of theatrical effect. Dramatic art, it is to be granted, may possibly be colored by the world in which it is created, but plays like this *Flight Into Egypt* aren't anything even distantly approximating dramatic art and their coloring is not so much by the world in which they exist as by theatrical paint-buckets in the hands of playwrights and directors who splash them with gaudy hues in an appeal to the box-office. Tabori's exhibit may accordingly affect favorably such people as remain children at heart and enjoy the circus spectacle of indifferent lions cunningly prodded into a semblance of savage jungle beasts, but, like the tired and cynical lions, criticism would relish less prodding and more relevant dramatic comfort.

The author's second import, *The Emperor's Clothes*, is little

better. A Hungarian by birth, he has set himself to write about a 1930 Budapest college professor who has lost his job for political utterances and who, to support his wife and child, is driven to the translating of sensational American fiction about Indians, cowboys and similar dime novel magnificos, along with novelizations of the Western moving pictures of the period. His small son, living in the lurid world of his imagination, fancifully associates the exploits of these characters with his cowardly father, and his boasting of the latter's heroism and derring-do reaches the ears of the police. Since a police state is dawning at the time, the father is suspected of subversive and revolutionary ideas and is seized by the authorities. Though he is tempted to free himself by arguing that his boy is dotty, his independence finally asserts itself and he re-establishes himself in his temporarily skeptical offspring's regard as the wild and woolly paragon the youngster had thought him to be. Here, plainly, is the material for comedy, indeed perhaps even for farce, but, though the playwright himself seems now and then to be more or less aware of the fact, he has not been able to overcome the indignation and horror he evidently suffered in the Budapest of his younger years and has found himself helplessly writing for the larger part in terms of tragedy. The catalysis of elements does not work, and what results is neither fish nor fowl but something that resembles marinated dramatic herring.

His writing, moreover, is such an ill-considered mixture of dreamy philosophical bonbons, melodramatic peppers, sentimental sauces and the kind of snap-and-crackle dialogue that figures in plays and films about racketeers and their molls that the exhibit gives the impression of having been written by three or four different men, at least two of them in the belief that they were working on totally dissimilar plays and none of them privy to what the others were writing. The style changes so often and so suddenly that the audience no sooner

other than a British female playwright, it is likely that its course would not be quite so tranquilly polite. If it came under the hands of a French playwright, for instance, the daughter of the commoner would in all probability turn out to be the illegitimate child of the aristocratic mother's late husband, thus embarrassing the proud old dame no end and reducing her to a contrite understanding of human equality. If, on the other hand, it were treated by a German, sex would be likely to rear its head and the relationship between the two youngsters would be implied to have undertones of perversion, the scene being symbolically laid in a cemetery. And if an American should engage it, one of the little girls would either be of inherited Nazi tendencies or possibly a psychopath whose condition was predicated on having been brought up on at least one of the stories of Henry James and the memoirs of Madame Blavatsky.

That there is, or at least should be, a place on our stage for plays which forgo the journalistic alarms of the moment, which echo a period when the world was relatively at peace with itself and which deal in human relationships apart from politics, physical strife and other such morbid intrusions, is plain. But the plays, to earn that place, must combine with their fleecy gentility a nimbler mind, a more substantial style, and a more ingenious invention than this of Miss Stuart's. Fine feeling demands fine writing, lest the feeling, however fine, take on the flavor of mush. Wholesomeness must be filtered through strength, lest it take on in turn the dry conventionality of an embroidered wall motto. To make the innocence of the past appealing, a playwright, in short, must have a considerable reserve of the sophistication of the present.

tumes and looking lovably about the stage at nothing. And Brandon de Wilde, the youngster who is regarded by many of the reviewers as only waiting to grow up a little to be another Edmund Kean, acted the enthralled devotee of Buffalo Bill, Hoot Gibson and the Scarlet Pimpernel as if he were little Lord Fauntleroy minus only the lace collar. Some of the secondary parts got a relatively better deal. Esmond Knight was at least acceptable as the Pinero character who has always loved the wife of his friend and who, as in Pinero, is ever ready to aid her in her moments of extremity. Nydia Westman did well by the bit role of a reprehensible neighbor and Michael Strong and Mike Kellin were creditable as twin intelligence agents. But Tamara Daykarhanova, a Russian import who, the program informed us, "was not only a member of the Moscow Art Theatre but also studied four years with Stanislavski," so mangled her single, extended speech that maybe, if she hopes to continue in the English-speaking theatre, she ought to study an extra year with Ray Bolger. The setting by Lester Polakov, showing the inside and outside of the Budapest house, was, however, excellent, even if somewhat too Belasco.

### *Jan de Hartog*

JAN DE HARTOG'S *The Fourposter* is a two-character play performed by two actors but is not so skimpy an occasion as it may appear to be, since we have lately been getting some plays of from ten to fifteen characters performed by no actors at all. What is more, if Hollywood continues to water the stage with specimens like some of those we have recently observed, the time is probably in the offing when, so far as acting is concerned, we will be sighing for the good old days of Corse Peyton and Guido Nadzo. Nor is Hollywood alone responsible.

Quite a number of the purer local species who have been in operation these past years seem to be actors in Equity name only, several of them even worse than the screen variety. In such circumstances the spectacle of even a pair who know their craft comes under the heading of the sensational. That Jessica Tandy is a highly accomplished member of her profession we have been aware for some time now, and she here again amply proves it. Hume Cronyn's talents may scarcely be up to hers but he is at least an actor of fairly adequate resources, which under the current dispensation may be put down as extraordinary. So what novelty their vehicle lacks, they atone for with the novelty of their competences.

Hartog's play, like Monckton Hoffe's *Many Waters* of decades ago and several other plays before and since, again traces the life of a married couple down the long years and again vouchsafes its performers the cherished opportunity to run the gamut of the makeup box from the pink powder picturing the glow of youth to the magnesia and line pencils of advancing age. The panorama follows the established pattern: the early raptures, the later misunderstandings, the patience and endurance, and the undercurrent of abiding affection that in the end tenderly triumphs. The usual way of handling the story in older days, when production expenses were light, was to set it in a multiplicity of scenes, probably including an opening one in which the young couple in ludicrous bicycle costumes were shown plighting their troth at a picnic by a lake, and involving enough characters to suffice *Chu Chin Chow*, among them not only the grandparents, uncles and aunts on both sides but milkmen, postmen, neighbors' children and almost everyone else except maybe the midwives who brought the two principals into the world. When expenses became somewhat heavier, the settings were cut down to four or five, the changing years being indicated by successively taking down from the walls of the old house the pictures

of Grover Cleveland, McKinley and Teddy Roosevelt and substituting for them those of Taft and Hoover; and the number of characters was reduced by eliminating everyone outside the immediate family but an alcoholic young cousin, usually a Harvard man. Then came the period of rigid economy, which gave birth, if not necessarily to the one-set, two-character play, to the kind of treatment and production that could be carried around in a trunk and traveled in a Pullman compartment, if the management was unaccustomedly generous.

*The Fourposter*, a sample of the later order, is a pleasant enough one-finger exercise on the yellowed keyboard, but the tune remains too familiar and its digital manipulation too chopstickish to stimulate much of the anticipated emotional reaction. What interest the presentation accordingly has lies almost entirely in a contemplation of the activities of its pair of performers and, once they have persuaded you of their abilities, their continued demonstration of virtuosity in grease-paint and costume hanky-panky becomes a childish business at best, both for them and for you.

It is Hartog's whim to make the bed of the play's title the focal point of the action over a thirty-five year marriage period. I am not altogether sure that the idea is as theatrically serviceable as he has imagined, since the emphasis on the sexual relationship, as the evening ages, acquires an unintentional farcical flavor disturbing to the play's underlying sentimental purpose, much as the large sign, "This Is It," on the men's toilet visible throughout the action of O'Neill's *The Iceman Cometh* distractingly operated in a different dramatic direction.

*Ugo Betti*

*The Gambler*, translated from the Italian of Ugo Betti by Alfred Drake and Edward Eager, is another in the lengthy line of plays concerning themselves with the protagonist's defeated attempt to make logic triumph over emotion, but in the process so runs up and down the side-alleys of metaphysics, theology, ethics, morals, mysticism, Freudianism and other topics and accompanies the running with such ceaseless, lofty rhetoric that any drama that might conceivably be in the materials is completely talked out of them. What the plot line of the play, if any such motionless concoction may be called one, treats of is the murder of a hated wife through her husband's apparent connivance, his guiltlessness of the actual crime in the eyes of earthly law, and his conscience, reinforced by the operations of divine law, that drives him to a realization of his factual culpability. But the story is so cluttered up with interminable excursions into the subjects mentioned, almost all of them couched in such an excess of oratory that they sound like a battle royal among a lot of graduate and overly voluble German university students, that it becomes lost in the din, which in turn involves so much circular and conflicting argument that the whole takes on the flavor of double-talk.

In the hope of conveying the nature of the writing to you, I jotted down on my program some of the most voluptuous samples, but on subsequently reading them could not believe them to have been possible. Yet they must have been faithful transcripts, since my good colleague, Walter Kerr, also recorded at least one of them, which was "An alembic capable of distilling from innocuous words a poisonous venom." The whole enterprise, indeed, is conducted on that resplendent plane and confounds confusion with an abstinence from any

possible lightness worthy of a voodoo doctor suffering from his patient's disease. Where a Shaw in *Don Juan In Hell* dealt with some of the items in Betti's philosophical catalogue not only with a likelier intelligence but with simplicity, compulsion and wit, the Italian author, a jurist by profession, brings to them a solemnity, portentousness and depressive fog which was assisted and thickened in the local presentation by the mortuary direction of Herman Shumlin and by the acting performances of a company in which Alfred Drake, and he only at odd intervals, suggested any affinity to the human race.

The so-called play, in sum, is another of those fiercely intellectual exhibits exposed from time to time by Continental Europeans determined to unload their philosophies in dramatic form, for which they have little or no talent, and resolves itself finally and only into a watery chowder of the thought of Pirandello, Strindberg, Dostoievski, Anouilh, Sartre, and the kind of minor playwright esteemed by the late Brander Matthews as a colossus.

### *Jean Bernard-Luc*

SOMETHING happened to Jean Bernard-Luc's comedy, *The Philemon Complex*, adapted by L. Bush-Fekete and wife under the title, *Faithfully Yours*, since it left Paris, and that something was unmistakably L. Bush-Fekete and wife. In the original the play, while purely the stuff of the boulevards, at least has a degree of saucy wit and dash. As adapted, aside from a few retained good lines of dialogue, the wit is vaudevillized into sidewalk gags and the dash converted into such a farcical physical activity on the part of its leading male character as would have embarrassed even the late Leon Errol.

Though the mocking of psychiatry is surely not green with novelty, Bernard-Luc managed, despite the forcing of what is essentially a one-act play into a full theatrical evening and despite the inevitable repetitions imposed upon him by the nature of his material, to inject into his comedy a sufficient share of light amusement. His adapters have reduced the share to the vanishing point. But, even had they been more successful, the two screen players who were elected to head the acting company would have contrived to botch their job. Robert Cummings, in the role of a husband whose wife is made to believe by a philandering psychiatrist that his indifference to her is to be accounted for by the morality of the marital relationship and that an illegal fling or two with other women will serve as a cure, acted as if he imagined the dramatic stage was intended chiefly for the operations of acrobats and descendants of the Keystone cops and indulged himself in such a superfluity of gymnastics, accompanied by rubbery face-makings, that he was exhausted at the end of the first act and thereafter had to fall back upon the lesser resources of an atomically propelled windmill. Ann Sothern, on the other hand, though she was tolerable in the earlier portions of the play before her acting limitations got the better of her, comported herself in the role of the wife with that excess of placidity and physical reserve which is often mistaken by novice actresses for poise, and inflected most of her lines in a single tone as if reading them from a blackboard stationed behind a movie camera.

In view of the fact that Bush-Fekete and his wifely collaborator are Hollywood scenario writers by present occupation and that they wrote and sold their adaptation to the movies before it was shown on the stage, and in further view of the fact that it was performed in the theatre by a pair of film stars, the only thing missing to complete the picture was the sale of popcorn in the lobby.

*Albert Husson*

THIRTY-SIX years ago Winchell Smith and John E. Hazzard provided Broadway with a big comedy success called *Turn To The Right*. It dealt with three criminals from Sing Sing who found quarters in a kindly up-state New York household, learned that the head of it was being victimized by a villainous swindler and combined their illegal wits to put him to rout in behalf of their benefactress. Samuel and Bella Spewak have now adapted Albert Husson's current big Paris success *La Cuisine des Anges* under the title *My Three Angels*. It deals with three criminals from Devil's Island who find quarters in a kindly French Guiana household, learn that the head of it is being victimized by a villainous swindler and combine their illegal wits to get rid of him in behalf of their benefactor. *Turn To The Right* was much the more amusing of the two, and for many reasons.

In the first place, its crooks' device for defeating the malefactor was a wonderfully ingenious and funny hocus-pocus including the swindling of the swindler out of his money with his own money, whereas neither Husson nor his adapters can think of anything better and unfunnier than murdering him with the joint aid of Conan Doyle and a poisonous snake. In the second place, where Smith and Hazzard let their story tell itself with no moralizing, the present authors can not resist the impulse to stop every once in a while and have one or another of their criminals remark on the nature of good and evil, the doctrine of the end justifying the means, and the dependence on viewpoint as to what really constitutes good ethics or bad. And, in the third place, their dramaturgy involves so many "plants" that their play not only often resembles a flower show but kills off any slightest suspensive interest it might otherwise have. There is also a fourth reason. The three

criminals in the earlier play were all of them comical characters. In this later variation only one, despite the authors' intention, is comical, another emerges as semi-straight, and the third is indistinguishable from a romantic juvenile lead.

Perhaps in the belief that if one murder is not sufficiently humorous, two murders will take up the comedy slack, the present exhibit, following at a distance the technic of *Arsenic And Old Lace*, duly executes a second. But, far from assisting the humor of the occasion, as the authors hoped, it only decreases it, since here again they can figure out nothing more inventive than duplicating exactly the poisonous snake business of the first murder. It is true that *Arsenic And Old Lace* literally and very profitably repeated its lethal doses of blackberry wine but the difference was that it was all conducted in an approximately burlesque vein, while in this case the murderers not only have an uncomfortable degree of seriousness about them but in the instance of the second finds it directed by José Ferrer out of any conceivable humor by showing the victim writhing downstage in Grand Guignol agony. Far from being amusing, the spectacle of the man's torture disconcerts the audience and arouses its sympathy, particularly since the criminals are made to stand over him and cruelly gloat over his suffering.

But, even were things some better, the authors do not seem to have appreciated the fact that a successful repetition of episode, whether humorous or serious, is one of the most difficult of playwriting stints to bring off. It is easy to repeat lines to comical effect, as, for example, Saroyan did with his "No foundation, all the way down the line" in *The Time Of Your Life*, and it is also easy to repeat bits of business to the same effect, as O'Neill did with the heroic beer-guzzling in *Anna Christie*. But situations are a quite different matter. Unless a playwright is uncommonly expert or witty, the repetition will seem labored and will become monotonous, and that is what

happens in this instance. Maybe if the criminals had recaptured the snake that accomplished the first murder and to their subsequent aghast surprise discovered that it had given impromptu birth to a precocious offspring that had done in the second victim, things might have been at least a little funnier.

There are, in spite of everything, a few amusing moments in the play but they are less organically amusing than superimposed, like overlooked raisins belatedly sprinkled on a cinnamon bun instead of being baked into it. And some of the more natural ingredients that may have seemed hilarious in the writing do not come off in the playing, as for one example the imaginary trial of the potential victim, which is not only labored but witless. Other points in the play also go awry in so far as comedy is concerned because of the authors' failure to suppress entirely the semi-serious note that creeps into their work. Thus, while the murder of the chief knave may be all very well because of the melodramatic exaggeration of him and his knavery, the murder of his nephew simply on the ground that he does not treat the daughter of the household politely is asking altogether too much of an audience's even comic understanding, especially since the authors' comedy approach to it is not at all comical but is rather infected with some venom.

Walter Slezak plays the leader of the criminals and, except for a tendency to betray his personal relish of himself in the role, gives a diverting performance, but neither Jerome Cowan nor Darren McGavin as the other miscreants conveys anything of the intended comedy flavor of the characters. Henry Daniell is more excessively villainous as the No. 1 villain than any stock company Sir Francis Levison who had not eaten for a week ever was, and Robert Carroll is not far behind him as hypothetical villain No. 2. Will Kuluva, as the head of the troubled family, is the only person on the stage who even re-

motely suggests a Frenchman; Carmen Mathews has little to do as his wife and does it; and Joan Chandler acts the daughter with the pedal precipitance and exultant chin customarily associated by ingénues and their directors with blooming and eager youth.

### *Jean-Louis Barrault*

"WHEN I was a boy of fourteen," Mark Twain wrote, "my father was so ignorant I could hardly stand to have the old man around. But when I got to be twenty-one, I was astonished at how much he had learned in seven years." Equally astonished seem to be some of our reviewers, now that they have grown up a bit, at the progress of the French theatre in the years since they were firmly convinced that our own American theatre led all the rest—"vitality," "enterprise," "courage" were some of the words they lavished on it—and that the French was just a rococo mixture of Comédie Française, which was devoted to red-velvet revivals of old purple-plush plays that only senile Cabinet members and their wives ever went to, and of revues full of naked women that younger Cabinet members attended without their wives and with the idea of picking up exotically wobbled American school-teachers on holiday.

But possibly I do the boys an injustice. They had also heard of the Palais Royal and its boudoir farces, which were reputedly so naughty that even the French blushed for shame at being caught at them and which, when they were occasionally imported to America, had to be vigorously adapted, lest everybody concerned be carted off to the hoosegow, by Broadway dry cleaners operating in collaboration with ministers of the gospel and, even so, were still sexually frisky enough to

offend most people, except maybe Al Woods and the Poillon sisters. The boys, however, were pretty positive about one thing, and that was French acting. This, they were self-persuaded, was of two species. Either it was the kind in which an actor was uncomfortable unless he was dressed as Cardinal Richelieu or the Cid and could let go with such roars as are customarily heard in our more cultivated country only in a slaughterhouse or save he were a former acrobat still sufficiently supple to dive under beds and into closets, the meanwhile hanging onto his pants, when a lady's husband, invariably played by Richelieu and Cid actors who had lost their voices, was announced by the maid to be coming up the garden path.

Their surprised education, which got under way two years ago with the visit of the late Louis Jouvet and his company, has now been furthered by the visit of the Jean-Louis Barrault-Madeleine Renaud repertory troupe. What the company was seen by them to be was no ordinary repertory aggregation but a thoroughly trained and well-orchestrated corps of actors and actresses proud of their purpose who proved their competences in comedy of manners, free verse satirical comedy, drama, pantomime, farce, comedy-vaudeville, dramatic comedy and classic Shakespeare. As with such enterprises in general, the acting may not always have been of a piece in some of the exhibits, but the exceptions save in the case of *Hamlet* were minor ones and the group on the whole was revealed to be of a superior brand, intelligently disciplined and directed, beautifully pure in diction, and deftly coached in the varied physical comportments demanded by the different plays. It served as an example of what a repertory troupe can and should be; and it should at once discourage the attempts that every now and then are inflicted upon us by our amateurs, whether raw or professional, as it should encourage the attention of those in our theatre who have hitherto sidestepped the idea of rep-

ertory because, as they should but apparently do not realize, it has been doomed to failure, like anything else, by its very badness.

Whenever a company like Barrault's succeeds in its intent, it is the local custom to bring up the matter of economics and to point out that such ventures are possible in Europe because of low costs, whereas they are out of the question here because of costs excessively high. That, it seems to me, is only part of the problem, and the lesser part. It is true that Barrault has been able to put on a play for a ridiculously small sum; the Marivaux production, for example, cost only a few thousand dollars whereas the same production of it locally would cost in the neighborhood of forty or forty-five thousand. But it all still remains less purely a matter of finances than of taste, intelligence, ambition, and pride. Local attempts at repertory, capitalized with plenty money, have collapsed because those attributes were lacking. Slapdash acting, stupid selection of plays, carelessness in direction and staging and a desire only to cash in as quickly as possible, with no thought for the ultimate value of quality, have naturally contributed to failure and to the legend of repertory's unacceptability. If two hundred thousand dollars were to be spent on such enterprises or if by God's and the unions' grace they could be undertaken for comparative chickenfeed, the result would be the same. Success, like Barrault's in his native land, has not proceeded from outlays of funds large or small. It has proceeded, as it might here, from an unselfish wish to serve the theatre well and from talent accompanying the wish.

### *Folies Bergère*

It is a rare year in which no one announces that he plans to

be a rarer year still that will see the show actually imported. The twenty-eighth successive such announcement has now duly appeared in the theatrical columns and if we are to believe it the celebrated exhibit in one or another of its manifestations will be placed on view here in the not distant future. I hope that you can contain your impatience.

The latest announcer, unlike the previous announcers, announces that he will do the show in English. This will be the first of his mistakes. The rapture American tourists have experienced with it through the many years has proceeded largely from the circumstance that it is in French, which most of them can not understand, and accordingly has had an exotic flavor, freely spiced with hints of the naughty and forbidden, that has encouraged a flowering of their libidos. If it is to be done in English, the effect on local audiences will resemble that of Colette illustrated by Al Capp. Since, furthermore, Barrault and his dramatic company managed to play to excellent business in the French language, the idea of the necessity for translating a French musical show into English seems to be as logical as the need to translate consommé on a restaurant menu as soup.

The matter of nudity will also present something of a problem to the importer. The chief drawing-card of the show in Paris, as everyone knows, has long been naked women and, if under local regulations they have to be covered up, people—or at any rate the kind of people who enjoy a giggle at the angels in a Michelangelo fresco because of what may euphemistically be described as their anatomical shortcomings—will be disappointed and disgruntled. “It isn’t at all like it was in Paree,” they will complain in their cosmopolitan wisdom, “and, as it isn’t, the show is no better and as big a cheat as *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* without the bloodhounds or Lou Holtz without a cane.”

What happened to the enterprise when they brought it to London two years ago, even though they didn’t exactly put

pajamas on the girls, will consequently probably also happen here. Nudity is as important a part of a *Folies Bergère* show as costumes are of a Restoration comedy and, if it is deleted, half the advertisement value of the exhibit is gone. Chamfort, the French wit, wrote that "Paris is a city of gaieties and pleasures where four-fifths of the inhabitants die of grief." But you can't make American theatregoers whether abroad or at home even remotely believe the latter part of that sentence any more than you can make them believe that two drinks of absinthe will not demoralize even an archbishop. And they somehow list among the gaieties the spectacle of female bareness. So unless the girls hang their clothes on a hickory limb and appear in the altogether, in which event the police will descend upon them and the management can't win either way, the local customers may just as well have *Bagels And Yox* re-imported for them from Atlantic City.

What else is there in an average *Folies Bergère* caper to stimulate the trade? First, the spectacular scenic displays. Though some of these are elaborate and attractive, even if they too often run to waterfalls of spangles, crystal chandeliers dripping with sequin-plastered wenches and papier-mâché elephants with more sequin-plastered wenches reclining in the ivory tusks, it is to be doubted whether they and their kind any longer have any material appeal to our theatregoers, to whom they seem fairly fossilized. They were acceptable in the Ziegfeld days, but those days are gone and whenever anything in the line has been shown in later years audiences have been disposed to shrug it off.

The Paris shows have, in addition, never been noted for their humor. Except for an exceptional sketch on the risqué side, the fun in them has been remarkable chiefly for its inexistence and recalls Gene Buck's often chronicled old cry whenever things got to be a bit droopy in the *Follies*: "Bring on the gals!" Nor have the principals been anything to talk about; in recent years, indeed, there has even been desperate

recourse to American performers, who have not been much good either and who could not pass muster in an American revue. So it looks as if the potential importers had their work cut out for them. They can scarcely fall back on the practice of Paris revues in bolstering up the shows with American female Negro performers, since the latter are no longer a sufficient novelty. Maurice Chevalier, if they can wangle a passport for him, might help, but not enough. The French girls, as even the most susceptible of Yankee tourists will allow, have for some time now been of the clock-stopping variety and not up in looks to American chorus girls. And, so far as the songs go, the music, when it has not consisted in appropriations of American popular tunes with maybe some pilfering from the pre-war German and Austrian, has been nothing to excite even a provincial jukebox. If, accordingly, they have to put dresses on the girls, they will have little left to entice the Broadway trade. All they will have will be an inferior old Earl Carroll revue with a couple of big production numbers, a singing comedian in a straw hat, and a skit in which Napoleon dives under the bed when Josephine is announced. They will not even be able to sell those rubber dolls and trick postcards in the lobby.

## SHAW AND HIS ACTRESSES

THE ENGLISH, who admire the vitality of Americans on the stage in proportion as they disesteem it in them off, where they somehow regard it as a mark of Yankee vulgarity, naturally succumbed to one of its leading acting exponents, Katharine Hepburn, when she appeared before them in Bernard Shaw's *The Millionairess*. Perusing the London reviews of her with their testimonials profuse in such terms as "dynamic," "electric," "blasting," "high-powered," "high-pressured," "galvanic" and the like, one indeed had to look twice to make certain it was a description of an actress one was reading and not something about a new jet project. What misgivings there were as to acting ability were overshadowed by the rapt appreciation of her physical vigor, which was such, the critics rejoiced, that it nigh tumbled the spectators out of their seats.

It was, however, no phenomenon. The American actors and actresses who have failed to arouse the enthusiasm of the English, notwithstanding some of them have been politely received, have been mainly those who most closely approximate English players in respect to vocal and physical deportment, just as those who have aroused it have been those who differ from them to a degree that makes them seem to the British to be relative freaks. It is not, mind you, a question of talent but rather one of personality. Since the English are more or less convinced that all Americans have at least a trace of Indian blood in their veins or, if not Indian, cowboy, they are disappointed if and when one shows up on the stage and com-

ports him- or herself with any sedateness and restraint. And so it is that their favor is generally reserved, whether in the drama, musical comedy or vaudeville, for our players, male and female, who if they do not exactly scalp an audience at any rate perform as if the stage were a warpath and they themselves the inheritors of some of the more emphatic characteristics of Geronimo and Sitting Bull. As the late A. B. Walkley once confided to me: "When the English go to see an American actor, they don't really go to see him demonstrate any acting ability so much as they go to see him as an American, much in the curious spirit they might go to look at some other such exaggeration of Nature as the Grand Canyon."

American gangster plays and films, the American stories of Zane Grey and Damon Runyon, and performers like Danny Kaye, Mary Martin, Dolores Gray, Jimmy Durante and Miss Hepburn, along with similar exhibits, loud, vital and bizarre, hence fascinate the English, since they provide a kind of wild holiday from the even tenor of the latter's amusement life. We, in the same way, find relief and fascination in the more placid English actors and English stories, since they in turn afford us a change from our own species. The great prosperity of English players in this country is not always so much a consequence of any exceptional acting talent as of mere difference and novelty of manner, speech, and comportment. One goes to the theatre, whether in England or America, to be surprised and stimulated, and one can not be surprised and stimulated—in any case not over a long stretch—by the same thing, however good.

Miss Hepburn's success, in England or in America and in films or on the stage, has certainly not been based on any particular acting competence but on the ability to give a performance of sufficient personal drive and ferment to make the less critical of her viewers, who include some of our critics and who constitute the great majority, mistake the one for the other. Any such performance, to be sure, is not to be sneered

at, since there are not many actresses able to register in the same way. And, if the truth be told, there are several points in favor of such an exhibition, theatrically if not critically. Highly proficient acting on the part of a personally dull actress can be as sedative as deficient acting on the part of a personally stimulating one can be enlivening. But it so happens that this commentator is supposed to be devoted, among other things, to the consideration of acting as a craft and even art and not, perhaps to his loss, to the jinks of comely and pre-hensile young women, whether on the stage or off. And so it is that, while granting to Miss Hepburn an unusual personality, a lot of good looks and that measure of attraction induced by both, he offers his conviction that she merely substitutes the superficialities of acting, popularly acceptable though they be, for anything resembling the depths of the real article.

That she is naturally the type for the Shaw role of the assertive, dominating and cyclonic Epifania, which includes a demonstration of the vim essential to the manly business of pugilism, and that she acquits herself satisfactorily in a display of the necessary qualities only adds to the deception. This, of course, is perfectly all right so far as it goes, but it seems to bewilder some out of the critical difference between a show provided by an appropriate performer and a show provided not only by an appropriate performer but one who brings technical expertness and subtlety to it and thus gives it some undertones and overtones. If the answer is that the Shaw play, which is fundamentally farce, does not really call for anything more than the actress gives it, the answer applies more to mere entertainment than to critical sense, since if it were sound it would argue as entirely sufficient the performances of those prize-fighters like Corbett, Fitzsimmons and Dempsey who have appeared in plays offering them as themselves and in which not even the most cynical critic could complain that they didn't look the parts, didn't have the

physical equipment for them, and didn't punch the bag more expertly than Coquelin ever could, even at his best.

I first saw *The Millionairess* fifteen years ago when it was produced in a local rural summer theatre with Jessie Royce Landis in the role now occupied by Miss Hepburn. It was a presentation in no way theatrically equal to the present one, but the faults of the play are still as evident now as they were then. Its "talkiness," emphasized by the critics as its principal defect, is not strictly the trouble with it, since other plays by its author have been equally talky and nevertheless interesting. The quality of the talk in this case is rather the point, and the quality is feeble. Here and there a glint and gleam emerge momentarily but over-all a very evident strain results in a flooring monotony and lassitude, and the net effect is of a display of damp fireworks that for all their popping and sizzling do not burst with any trace of color. The noise is there, but without any spectacular reward.

In this case Shaw has failed completely to live up dramatically to the preface on bosses with which he introduced the published play. In the preface, which discusses the merit and, as well, the danger of naturally constituted dictators of one species or another and which points out that megalomania may infect uncommon people when they find themselves in a position of authority, there is all the force of adept writing and seigniory of mind. But the force disappears in the play's excessive facetiousness, farcical exaggerations, and labored caprices. Worse, what Shaw doubtless imagined would be funny in the didoes, both verbal and physical, isn't anything of the kind but suggests only the skilled prestidigitator that he was descending to such dime novelty-store tricks as water-squirting boutonnieres and exploding cigars. Even the validity of what ideas there are is minimized by the overdone monkeyshines with which they are peddled.

As remarked and is only too well known, it was impossible for Shaw to write an entirely dull play but in this instance, as

in one or two others, he came as close to doing so as would seem, with him, to have been impossible. Save for a few passages, the evening is dramatically tiresome and leaves one with the impression of a vaudeville bill wholly made up of exactly the same kind of acts. It is in such a situation, of course, that the sawdust ring performance of Miss Hepburn, relieving the general humdrum with its succession of trapeze leaps, bear-wrestlings, shots out of a cannon and similar remotely approximate demonstrations of the histrionic art, has been received in some quarters as the true acting gospel.

The tendency of his more rabid fans, now that the great one has gone to his Maker, to acclaim even the worst of his plays as genius-laden would have made him belch in derision. Shaw's critical acumen was never in finer flower than when he directed it against himself, though he had the slyness and wit to express it in such wise that the laugh was usually on the other fellow. The one thing above all others that he could not stomach was adulation on the part of anyone for whom he entertained intellectual contempt and so it is that some of the swooning now being indulged in by certain members of the group known as the Shaw Society of America is precisely the kind of thing that, were he still alive, would appeal to his critical sense as the most offensive sort of hogwash.

Take, for example, the outpourings of one Felix Grendon, listed in the Bulletin issued by the Society as one of its board of directors and contributing editors. Since the stated object of the Society is "to make him (Shaw) more widely understood and appreciated," it may well be wondered how it imagines it is assisting any real understanding and appreciation of its idol by publishing such guff as this on the subject of his last play, *Buoyant Billions*, duly found not only by intelligent criticism but by its honest author himself to be, along with *The Millionairess*, one of his weakest efforts. The guff:

"Pay no attention to the depreciation of *Buoyant Billions*, Shaw's last full-fledged play. It merely means that the critics

and professors are running true to form. Have they not from first to last reviled, disparaged, and ridiculed all the important Shaw plays, *Saint Joan* alone excepted, as each masterpiece appeared (*sic*)? Not until Shaw became world-famous, just before the first World War, did the critics climb on the Shavian band wagon and modestly announce themselves as the leaders of the band (*sic*). Even then, they kept on belittling and pooh-poohing the newer Shaw plays that came along (*sic*) . . . The only Shavian plays that met with their approval were at least thirty or forty years old (*sic*). *Don Juan In Hell* is a case in point. In 1905 the literati declared this interlude to be so utterly talky as to be quite beyond the theatrical pale. But no sooner had the Drama Quartette, in 1951, demonstrated that *Don Juan* could hold packed houses spellbound than the reckless critics leaped to the front page (*sic*) to tell an astonished world that they had always considered the Scene in Hell immortal (*sic*) . . . And now . . . they do their stuff as of old and pronounce *Buoyant Billions* impossibly talky-talky! No doubt the poor fellows will see the light roundabout the year 2000 . . . We hear the several Buoyants give their candid views in a mind-searching and heart-searching discussion, the Shavian discussion that is now as world-famous as Plato's Socratic dialogue (*sic*). 'People don't talk that way?' Well, mark my words, they soon will (*sic*). Even now, you may listen to the conversation of the young people 'round you and be surprised to find how closely it approaches the candor of the dialogue in *Buoyant Billions* (*sic, sic* and double *sic*)."

No writing man of eminent position is spared such humiliation by well-meaning but microcephalic worshippers who insult his higher accomplishments by proclaiming his negligible and worse to be on a par with them. Though there are critics who still seem to believe that there can be no off-day for an authentic artist and that his work must be always on the highest level, there are others, more intelligent, who appreciate

that miracles are the better part of fiction and that even the labors of the Lord God Almighty Himself have not been all of a piece. As Elbert Hubbard once remarked, "Genius may have its limitations but stupidity is not thus handicapped." And it is such stupidity that Shaw, now more greatly than ever, suffers.

*The Millionairess*, for all its occasional flashes, is a very bad play, and there is no getting 'round the fact. Its farcical elements are not sufficiently comical; its ideas on power and money lose on the stage what sparkle they had in the whimsically maneuvered prose of the printed page; and there is plenty evidence that, duly appreciating the sag, Shaw had a perspirational time of it trying to inject theatrical life into his play with that overwrought extravagance which is ever the mark of a temporarily defeated dramatic imagination. People, fatuous people, like to attribute such decline in an artist to advancing age, as if imagination, facility in expression and invention were physical rather than mental. Much of Shaw's writing in his late years had all the bounce of his earlier, and his mind retained much of the bubble of his younger years. It is simply that he had exhausted the stage so far as he was concerned and that it had no more to give him, at least in his own idiosyncratic dramatic way. It was not he that was tired; it was, from his point of view, the stage.

The symptoms were evident years ago. The plays of his later days, plays like *Geneva*, *The Simpleton Of The Unexpected Isles*, *Too True To Be Good*, and the like were little more verbose than such of his earlier ones as *Getting Married* and *Misalliance*, and the ideas in them were just as sprightly. They were set down as poor plays because they were largely repetitions of the familiar that earlier in his life was theatrically novel and startling. It was not Shaw that grew old; it was time. And the bad play that is *The Millionairess* is a token of the fact. Had it been produced forty years ago the very people who now judiciously recognize it as a

bad play would have been surprised into regarding it as a fresh, lively and invigorating contribution to advancing dramatic art. Those who presently still pay tribute to it are those meant by Goncourt when he allowed ironically that genius is the talent of a man who is dead.

## II

THE THEATRE GUILD's revival of the admirable *Saint Joan* again offered professional and volunteer criticism an opportunity to debate the acting capabilities of Miss Uta Hagen, who had the role of the Maid. Before we go into the question, however, let it be recalled that the play is such a notable work that its performance, whether good or not good, remains a second consideration, since—as the records attest—nothing seems to be able to damage its inner life and vitiate its effect. It is quite possible, indeed, that it might be acted satisfactorily even by marionettes, a remark that will, of course, be received with a pained shudder by those who firmly believe that fine drama demands above everything fine acting and that, save it get it, it must disastrously suffer, an argument open to some doubt, and on two counts. The first is that, even in the best of criticism, there is often marked difference of opinion as to what constitutes fine acting, and the second is that the generality of theatre audiences is given frequently to accept an inferior brand for something pretty superior. There is also a third count, and the most important of all. It is that, if fine drama arbitrarily rested its case and position on acting, at least half the classics, which have intermittently been murdered, would have gone to their permanent theatrical grave years ago. The real test of a play's quality, in short, is to be determined by the degree in which it is able to resist and triumph over a poor performance of it.

Miss Hagen's performance, to return to the tonic, was variously received, as were some of her previous performances in

other plays. In some quarters she was endorsed as an "intellectual actress" and hence perfectly suited to a role that itself has been oddly described in the same quarters as essentially, even severely, intellectual. Passing over the point that it is hard to see why an intellectual role, granted it be one, demands any particular intellect on the part of its interpreter, since its intelligence is already established and its projection calls for no independent mentality, we should like to inquire just what is meant by the term intellectual actress, which has been visited from time to time on a strange assortment of the designated species. The late Mrs. Fiske, for example, was one, and the critics of the period never ceased impressing the news upon us. Yet the lady, who devoted herself for the greater part to plays and roles that necessitated no more strain on the brain centers than a game of Mississippi marbles, never gave the slightest evidence of her cerebral resources in her public utterances and, when it came to her stage demonstrations, was best described by her close personal friend and one-time producing associate, the late John D. Williams: "What Minnie, who has no delusions about herself, is thinking when playing a role is about the eight bottles of beer she is going to enjoy after the performance is over." (It seems that Mrs. Fiske was an inordinate lover of the brew and in her meetings with Williams at the Brevoort after the night's performance would frequently consume enough of it, without showing the least effect, to shame even a Bavarian virtuoso.)

What is generally mistaken for intellect in an actress is, in brief, simply an outward suggestion and implication of brain functioning. This is maneuvered by an ordering of the features into a semblance of serious cogitation, by the kind of comportment when not speaking that implies a solemn disregard of and even contempt for what the other actors are doing or saying, and by indicating such deep introspection that one wonders whether she will wake up in time to get back into her role. Miss Hagen thus usually gives the impression

that she is playing Trilby to her own Svengali. When on occasion she is able to free herself from her own spell, she gives off flashes of honestly felt emotion—and at such times is effectual—but more generally the picture is of an actress operating by a clocked mechanism, with what is called inspiration no part of a performance.

Commenting on her earlier exercises in Odets' *The Country Girl*, which many of the critics swooned over as the epitome of fine acting, I remarked: "Miss Hagen, except for the feeling she usually projects that she is constantly thinking of the technical angles of the role she is playing, manages the part of the wife convincingly enough, which is not too easy a job since, until very late in the evening, the author gives her little to do but to snoop around the stage trying to find bottles of liquor which her actor-husband has hidden; bow her head, sniffle, and wipe her nose frequently with Kleenex to indicate her grief over her and her mate's predicament; and walk around the scenery in pantomimic agony." Shaw unfortunately gives her very much more to do and she accordingly finds the job a much more difficult one, and is convincing only at widely isolated moments. She employs shrillness in lieu of forceful eloquence; her defiance is now and again a matter of mere physical posture rather than the thoughtful emotion implicit in it; and over-all there is about her an unmistakable ingrained chill of being that rids her acting of warm audience response. She does, as observed, a few things well, but her acting as a composite seems too studiously meditated and as a result too machine-made to sing itself into the rhapsodic symphony that Shaw so wittily and beautifully composed.

### III

Nor since John Ringling North imported Gargantua from the wilds of savage Bermuda, to say nothing from Austria of Unus, the man who could stand on one finger, has anything

created quite such a stir as the importation from England of the Olivier-Leigh two-ring circus that went into operation on Billy Rose's Ziegfeld lot. And perhaps with some warrant, since the show was a big and fancy one as shows go these days and since it provided an unusually spectacular and striking theatrical occasion. There is no disputing that fact, so let it go down in the record. For those who venerate the showmanship aspects of the theatre, it was, in short, just about all that could be desired, but for those who are curious about critical quality, I fear that, despite the deafening racket of the jubilizing brass bands, something was found to be missing, and that something was acting in any way commensurate with the advance hullabaloo. For the hard truth is that the performances of the two stars in Shaw's *Caesar And Cleopatra*, while obviously enchanting to the snobs and groundlings, in no degree approached the admirable ones given here a couple of seasons before by Cedric Hardwicke and Lili Palmer, and that Olivier's Antony in *Antony And Cleopatra* was at no point anywhere near the equal of the Antony of Godfrey Tearle in the most recent local production of the Shakespeare play. Nor, forgoing comparisons for the moment, was the Cleopatra of Vivien Leigh, pictorially beautiful, other than exteriorly impressive.

It will be noticed, I hope, in the interests of Anglo-American amity, that where comparisons have been indulged in I have cautiously matched British players with British, so no ripostes on the part of the London critics, please. For extra good-will measure, indeed, the present performances were far from matching those of Forbes-Robertson and even Gertrude Elliott in the original production of the Shaw play in America, though they greatly excelled those of the Helen Hayes-Theatre Guild presentation some years ago and, of course and emphatically, those in the Bankhead Shakespeare disaster of gruesome memory.

There is no question that Sir Laurence and his Lady brought a keen intelligence to their roles, which probably again goes to prove that intelligence, as the illustrious Rachel remarked, is valuable to an actor only before the curtain goes up and thereafter is best to be forgotten and left in the wings. The English couple, particularly in the Shakespeare play, seemed to be so pridefully intent on projecting it throughout their acting at the expense of plausible emotion that the impression was much like overbright pupils giving their beloved teacher an encyclopedia in place of an apple. Their performances in the tragedy suggested at times that they thought it was written by the Irish wit who wrote the antecedent play and had not accommodated themselves to the sudden change in the bill. It is not, surely, that I believe with several London critics that Miss Leigh's Cleopatra in the Bard's play—to quote Ivor Brown's criticism of them—"failed in the showing of libidinous ecstasy." That is the sort of criticism which apparently imagines such ecstasy is only to be portrayed in terms of the kind of heavings and gruntings executed by actresses like the late Olga Nethersole and which does not acknowledge that still waters may run even deeper and hotter. It is rather that Miss Leigh's still waters style of acting is as shallow and unhinting as is Olivier's, whose depiction of Antony's torment suggested less the psyche of an historical world figure caught in a wanton's snares than an actor suffering alternately from an acute attack of trigeminal neuralgia and an embarrassing amoebic dysentery, albeit something of a case might conceivably be made out in the latter direction in view of the Egyptian food the Roman was forced to eat.

Though the two players were relatively better in the Shaw play, the internally obdurate nature and style of which made lesser demands upon their emotional equipment, it seems to me that here, also, Olivier brought too arid and scholastic an air to an interpretation of the winking Caesar and recited the

wit and humor instead of permitting them to flower out of any characterization. And it seems to me, further, that Miss Leigh's Cleopatra did not catch anything of Lilli Palmer's invaluable essence of genuine as opposed to synthetic girlhood, let alone the implication of budding sex and passion. Their performances in both plays were perfectly respectable, respectable, so to speak, as good and deserving Episcopalians at the gorgeous hula-hula party that is fine dramatic art. Both are upright and honest and visually attractive players—and both have acquitted themselves well in some of their previous appearances—but here they lacked the resources to distil the sauce of Shaw and light the flame of Shakespeare. They put on, as earlier noted, an elaborate show and an interesting one, but it was a show for the easily gratified general public, not for the more particular audience that demands something more of acting than names, titles, and an English trademark.

There was also the matter of the plays. It was surely a good theatrical stunt to produce them successively, but is there critically any logic in making a Siamese twin out of two such disparate dramatists and two such totally opposed dramatic styles? There is sense and reason in the successive productions of the four Chronicle plays as done at Stratford-on-Avon and previously in Pasadena, but it strikes me that there is as little in this Shaw-Shakespeare combination as there would be in one of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and *Shuffle Along*, even though Shaw's satirical picnic was shamelessly tortured into romantic historical melodrama to accommodate it to the over-all pattern.

The wit, humor and sardonic essence of Shaw's gala stubbornly persist in its very bones and hence posed a problem to Olivier, whose acting of Caesar had the aspect of trying to sit simultaneously on two stools: one, the romantic historical at moments fairly firm; the other, the witty and humorous, minus a leg and tottery. Made up to look alarmingly like an ailing Casey Stengel and electing to emphasize the purely physical

rather than the mental and emotional weariness of the character, he portrayed it in such a state of corporeal decay that Caesar in all likelihood would have died before ever he got back to Rome. His depiction of weariness took on additionally so great an air of listlessness that it diminished the vigor of the Shavian text. He read the lines with the Justice Shallow cackle, squeak and quaver customarily reserved by stock actors for the roles of senescent misers and rustic grandfathers and thus removed much of the bite from the humor, let alone making his passing interest in the prehensile little Cleopatra seem more that of an aged and impotent psychiatrist than of a warrior in his fifties who, though bald and stringy and weighted down with the problems of his world, yet has been vouchsafed by Shaw—to say nothing of the historical record—a still ambitious eye where the female sex was concerned. His was, in short, the performance of a tired actor rather than the portrayal of a tired conqueror.

Miss Leigh's kitten of the Nile, on the other hand, in the earlier stages of the play was more insistently athletic than even Audrey Hepburn in her performance of the young French girl in *Gigi*, which at moments, under the director's notion that youth is ignorant of the news that God supplied the human race with posteriors to be at least occasionally sat upon, took on the pedal exuberance of an overly zealous ice hockey player. An actress of uncommon beauty and much personal hypnosis, Miss Leigh brought to the role what smacked of something like a Junior League species of acting: thin, watery and more suggestive of a modern bobby-soxer intent upon getting Winston Churchill's autograph than of a young Egyptian budding into a sexual passion that was one day to shatter a great Roman chieftain and that, even now before the bud was more than faintly ripe, caught something more of the mighty Caesar's notice than mere paternal interest.

The report on the Shakespeare drama is not much more ex-

citing. Olivier's Antony had several good points, notably in the colloquy with the challengeful Octavius and in one or two of the later scenes with Cleopatra, but it was in general an Antony given to the same weakness and lassitude as his Caesar in the Shaw play, the main difference being largely a younger makeup. This was difficult to understand in view of the actor's noticeable acumen in other immediate directions. The only way it possibly could be accounted for was in the fact that the play, like Shaw's, was given a full rehearsal performance to a paying audience on the afternoon directly preceding the official opening and that Olivier, not to mention some of the other members of the cast, was tuckered out from the strain. But whatever the reason, it remains that the Antony he offered to the critics on that night was absurdly feeble and implausible, an Antony who smirked like a chorus girl throughout the first half of the play in a pussylike depiction of supposedly overpowering infatuation and who, when called upon later for a show of strength, simply let go with such blasts from his windpipe as matched the rantings and roarings of an old-time actor of the genus *porcus*.

Miss Leigh's Cleopatra was again a spectacle of beauty but again deficient, and for some of the same reasons as her Cleopatra in the antecedent demonstration. Though her lines had grown up, she had not, and her serpent of the Nile remained a young girl advanced in years only through the aid of shoe lifts, less violent gymnastics, and a voice lodged farther down in the throat. The passions were those of a school-girl with a crush rather than of a woman anatomically inflamed and, when anger seized her, were elocutionary rather than anything deeper. Her death scene was the death of a declamatory student of the role, scarcely the demise of a woman ridden by tragedy of the mind and heart. The spectacle, to repeat, was one of loveliness, but the drama that should have been in it, despite the magnificent Shakespearean line, was absent. Cleopatra Dobson was the name.

It is clear, in conclusion, that American snobbery played a considerable part in the enthusiastic reception of the titled British pair and that, in the case of Sir Laurence in particular, criticism disregarded his failure in achievement and obsequiously devoted itself to kissing his aspiration.

#### IV

ONE of the prime satisfactions of the early Fifties was the performance of the First Drama Quartette, in which the males outnumbered the female sex, ably represented by Agnes Moorehead, three to one, in the hitherto seldom produced third act of Shaw's *Man And Superman*, billed as *Don Juan In Hell*. Those skeptics who doubted the effect of what was announced as a reading of the script on a sceneryless, costumeless stage and, worse, one burdened with a microphone for each of its four reciters were dumfounded to find themselves as badly mistaken as they often are in the case of plays which, though set and dressed to the ears, register no perceptible effect other than an audience's impatience at having wasted its time and money on them. Far from being a further step in the detheatricalization of the theatre in the line of the experimental bare stage drama, the so-called theatres-in-the-round operated in former hotel dance parlors, garages and haberdashery stores, and the barns and town halls masquerading rurally as playhouses, the exhibit constituted just about the reallest theatre we had had in some time. The life blood of the theatre pulsed through it as it rarely does these days in the conventionally staged offerings of Broadway, and it proved again that, given a reputable script, good actors and an illuminated platform that doesn't break down, money spent on picture-book scenery and fancy costumes is money often wasted, except perhaps in the estimation of people who demand frilled-paper décor on their lamb chops.

As characterized by an admirable company consisting of

Charles Laughton, Cedric Hardwicke, Charles Boyer and the before-mentioned Miss Moorehead, the reading-acting of Shaw's wise and witty exercise in paradox, with its wily inquiry into the muddled philosophies of mankind in its search for self and happiness, projected the essence of drama much more electrically than in anticipation would have seemed likely. (I was rather surprised myself.) Here you had simply four players on a naked stage. The three actors were in dinner clothes, the actress in a dinner dress. A few stools were distributed about the platform and four lecterns on which rested the players' parts, and, horrible thought, the four microphones. Jo Mielziner and the Brooks Costume Co. were nowhere in sight. There was not even a drop curtain. Yet, once the reading of that savory script by those resourceful players began and progressed, the feeling of elaborate theatre permeated the audience and in the end the spectacle that was created in the imagination overshadowed all the *Fantasmas* and *Superbas* that have glittered up our stage. The illusion was remarkable, and it all goes again to show that nothing can equal the human fancy whether it is or isn't assisted by outside agents. The notion that Shaw is no longer on this earth is preposterous. He has never been more alive. The belief that he is dead is inculcated in some people only because his actors at times perform in the capacity of pall-bearers.

## PLAYERS IN GENERAL

WITH small exception, critics and actors have one big thing in common: neither thinks the other knows his business. The prejudice on the part of actors goes to such extremes, indeed, that if a critic gives one of them a good notice the actor will disdain it and argue that if the critic were not a calfhead he would have given him a much better one. It is, however, not my purpose to enter into the merits of the case on the one side or the other, but rather out of the exuberance of my heart to confide to the acting profession certain things, based upon almost a half-century of observation, that may prove to be of practical benefit to its members. If, characteristically, they should view them skeptically as being only the fatuous out-givings of one in the critical industry, it will be their loss. The observation to which I refer covers play reviewers in general and their reactions to players in general. Thus I tattle to the latter a few of the kind of roles, regardless of the quality of the plays, in which, if they are lucky enough to land them, they can hardly fail of critical success.

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I have, for example, yet to see an actor who weighs over one hundred and ninety-five pounds miss getting laudatory notices from the reviewers if he appears in any play laid in a hot climate clad in a wrinkled white linen suit and mops his perspiring brow every few minutes with an oversize handkerchief, preferably bandana. If meanwhile he flops himself down into a chair and grunts, the notices will be even more favorable.

If an actor can obtain the role of a drunk, he is certain to impress the critics provided only he bear in mind one thing, and that is to act it in a restrained manner. However inebriated the role calls upon him to be, if he plays it as if he had imbibed nothing much stronger than ginger beer and confines his display of intoxication mainly to his facial expressions, the reviewers will put him down as quite an artist. But let him, as in the old melodrama days or in those of Richard Mansfield, so much as once bump into the piano or mistake the oil painting of Rutherford B. Hayes on the wall for his hostess and salute it with a low bow and he will be taken sternly to task for being a *charcutier*. With actresses, however, it is otherwise. Let any actress, particularly one no longer young, be cast in a role that displays her as given to the excessive use of alcoholic liquor and act it, though with an even voice, as if she were just a shade this side of delirium tremens and she is pretty sure to make a hit with the reviewers if only she remembers two things. One of them is to let her hair tumble down over her nose and periodically make futile stabs at brushing it back into place, the meantime agitating her head as if scaring away a bee. The other is to persuade the playwright or director to give her an exit up a long flight of stairs and to manage the first five or six steps with some strained poise but to negotiate the rest with enough wobbling hesitation and enough steadyng herself against the banister to suggest less a woman on her way upstairs to her bedroom than one heading an expedition up the icy slopes of Mt. Everest.

If, God forbid, I were an actor, I should pray night and day that someone would give me a job playing a Chinaman or a Jap, preferably of a serious nature. All that seems to be necessary for an Occidental actor to convince the reviewers that he is a fellow of large histrionic ability is to make himself up as an Oriental and present his shortcomings as virtues. His natural lack of anything resembling fluid facial expression and ease of physical comportment will find itself effectively

camouflaged under the imperturbability of countenance and rigidity of body always associated by the reviewers with Chinese and Japanese, and if only he exercises the precaution not to indulge in any slightest indication of real acting he may buy the next morning's newspapers assured of tributes to his performance as a masterpiece of constraint and acting control. Again, however, it is different in this case with actresses. Paradoxically, the very things that impress the critics in the instance of the actors are held against the female performers. If you ask me why, I can't tell you, but the fact remains that let an actress give an account of an Oriental role every whit the equal of that of any such male and she will nevertheless not fare so happily with the selfsame critics, who like as not will disparage her performance as being better suited to musical comedy. Once in a great while an actress like Florence Reed has passed muster with them on the score of a performance as ridiculous as those given by the kind of actors mentioned, but most often, as I say, the very elements they have admired in the latter's performances will be put down as faults when vouchsafed by the ladies.

It is sufficiently known that an actress who has long been identified with what may roughly be described as "moral" roles will usually fascinate the critics if she suddenly shows up in one picturing her as a loose woman. It has seldom failed, though if the role is that of a prostitute the actress must be careful to play it, as the remarked on actors must play drunks, with a measure of reserve bordering on the lady-like. It is also sufficiently known that a dramatic actress who has never been suspected of being able to sing or dance and who in fact can do neither is certain to fetch the reviewers if at one point in a play she bursts out with a bit of song and terpsichore, even though it may be such, were she to venture it in small-time vaudeville, as would get her catcalls from even the ushers. Contrariwise, it does not work that way with

dramatic actors. If one of them seeks to surprise the reviewers into admiration by lifting his voice in accustomed song, he had best be good, else he will be embarrassed by laughter. And if he ventures a few dance steps, even with a fair proficiency, he will be thought silly, that is, unless he is an ancient of seventy-odd years or more, in which case he will be the recipient of tumultuous applause, especially if he becomes so winded before he finishes that the reviewers fear he will collapse from a heart attack and probably die before the next day's performance.

## II

ONE of the onerous features of critical practice, notably in the recent seasons, has been the unavoidable call all too often to write more than merely unfavorable notices of so many of the Hollywood film players who have seen fit to appear on the legitimate stage. The disrelish has proceeded from two reasons. The first is that their utter and at times even ridiculous incompetence in the higher medium has made it necessary for the reviewer to deny them any polite consideration whatsoever, always an uncomfortable position for one with even faintly housebroken manners. And the second is that he opens himself to the charge of prejudice against screen actors in general, along with its collateral shower of venomous mail which donkeys who are in the habit of making the charge fiercely unload upon him. There is, of course, a way out of his dilemma. He might, as William Archer once argued, though he seems not always to have followed his own suggestion, pass over the miserable performances and refrain from mentioning the culprits by name, devoting himself instead and entirely to the plays in which they show themselves. But any such procedure, while it would spare him his present em-

barrassment, would be unreasonable, since the generality of readers in the present state of the Republic is much more interested in learning of the screen players than of their vehicles, and not to tell them of them would irk the idiots out of all patience. So the reviewer must willy-nilly commit himself in respect to the mountebanks and commit himself without reserve, however much the continued derogation brings a flush to his otherwise immaculate cheeks.

All this is by way of approaching another contemplation of the activities of the movie star, Olivia de Havilland, who has privileged herself a time as Shaw's *Candida*. Previously, it will be recalled, the queen came on from Hollywood to display herself in *Romeo And Juliet*, the result not to be mentioned in punctilious theatrical society. As the Bard's romantic heroine she indicated to even the most hospitable critic a flawless lack of talent for the dramatic medium. Determined as she was to prove herself, it was immediately evident that she had none of the necessary qualifications of an actress ambitious to succeed in the classic drama or, for that matter, in any kind of drama; and her failure was predestined. Though the Shaw role imposes much lesser demands upon an actress, Miss de Havilland is no better in it than she was in the Shakespeare role. Her voice is still inflexible and her efforts to lend it variety, intelligent inflection and a modicum of melody completely baffle her. She still reads the lines mechanically, much as if she were being instructed by a coach signalling to her from the wings, and the few gestures with which she embellishes them resemble those of a child brought into the room to entertain the family's friends with a school recitation. Nothing of Shaw's heroine emerges beyond the superficial, and one leaves the theatre with the impression that, for all it mattered, the role might just as well, indeed a lot better, have been read through a loud speaker at one side of the proscenium by the stage manager.

As I have said, it seems a caddish business to write in such terms of any person, even a sorely misguided camera performer, but there is no other honest way. If I were the only reviewer who expressed the opinion of Miss de Havilland's incompetence, I should, while not distrusting the soundness of my personal view, nevertheless feel a bit more uncomfortable about things, but I appear to have considerable company. It is true that, resorting to the dodge of comparison, one or two of the reviewers have eased their souls by allowing that the film actress' performance in the Shaw play is not as dismaying as was that in the Shakespeare. But, even were it fact, that is much like allowing for degrees of pain. Not to indulge in such evasion and to set down the undiluted critical news, it accordingly becomes the chronicler only to say that, judging from her two appearances on the local stage, this Miss de Havilland is still far from ready for it, that she clearly needs many years of preparation for it, and that in the meantime she would be much better off if she stuck to the films, a medium in which she has gathered high honors and high position for what the connoisseurs of the Hollywood art regard as acting. I take it there is accordingly no need to explain the omission of Miss de Havilland from the preceding chapter.

Preceded by a fanfare that equalled that heralding Howard Johnson's dollar and eighty-five-cent Sunday dinners, Ginger Rogers, another Hollywood illuminata, also duly arrived for a fling at the stage in a thing by Louis Verneuil bearing the title, *Love And Let Love*. Accompanying her was a wardrobe of such voluminosity and brilliance as would have put to ignominious shame the late Eleonora Duse's pair of simple black dresses and which must have consumed so much time in the trying on and fitting that little was left for preparation in the way of acting. As a consequence, we engaged an attractive woman bedecked in raiment splendiferous enough to paralyze the eye of a Bernhardt but one whose histrionic

equipment was still, alas, damp behind the ears. Miss Rogers' chief gifts, indeed, appeared to remain those which had brought her eminence on the screen. These, which included acting only in the sense and degree that it goes by the name in the films, were bright, blonde looks, a buoyant personality which radiated good-nature, a figure which she knew how to display to advantage, and that projected air of camaraderie which makes friends and influences people. But, valuable as they are and cajoling to the box-office as they may sometimes be, they call for an added attribute to pass critical muster on the dramatic stage, and that added attribute, as intimated, is the ability to convert a mere performance into a thorough interpretation of a role and into some semblance of character. Miss Rogers performed, but she acted only exteriorly. She was nice to look at but, when it comes to the business of acting, she most often found herself out on a limb, and one decidedly shaky.

Verneuil's contrivance for the fair one's bow was what was known in the days before the automobile as a "vehicle" and had a lot of frayed fringe on top. I am afraid it also had some wheels missing, since it experienced a great deal of trouble getting anywhere. The axle-grease on what wheel it had, furthermore, was scarcely sufficient and the result was a loud creaking that doubly embarrassed Miss Rogers' efforts.

The telling of plots is always an infliction, but in this case the telling is not half the infliction that listening was. Not only had the playwright dug deep into the trashbasket for his, but he evidently got his thumb caught while doing so, judging from the quality of the writing. Ginger, so rumbled the vehicle, was a wonderful, ravishing actress who, like all wonderful, ravishing actresses, was having trouble with her love-life. Unlike the average wonderful, ravishing actress, who in the same circumstances would either take to the bottle, get herself a new fellow or go to a psychoanalyst, she consulted a

French diplomat, probably on the theory that French diplomats, though they may not be so endowed diplomatically, are all experts on amour, at which they spend that larger portion of their lives when not in frock coats. During the period of consultation, Ginger gave indication that she had fallen for him, but the old boy, exercising his Gallic sagacity, perceived that her heart was still set on a younger man whom she had known in the past and, as you had no difficulty in predicting, magnanimously stepped aside and gave her over to him. Just to make things a little harder for an audience, Verneuil, apparently without shame, went in for the primitive dual role hokum, and so we viewed Ginger appearing not only as the ravishing actress aforesaid but also as the latter's prim, sedate sister. I appreciate that there still live people who are inordinately fascinated by the spectacle of an actor or actress dashing off the stage in one guise and reappearing soon thereafter in another and that they esteem the childish business as the mark of a performer's versatility and even genius. But, so far as this old hand is concerned, not since he was six years old—and rather backward for his age—has it seemed to him half so satisfactory as the spectacle of an actor or actress modestly sticking to a single role and doing well by it. Miss Rogers, however, appeared to be enchanted by the nonsense and it must be admitted in her favor that the kind of people above referred to appeared to be equally bewitched by it.

If by any chance you think you detect in all this a faint air of condescension toward screen acting, you are right. Such acting, even at its best, bears much the same relation to stage acting that the scenario of a play does to the completed play. It is the outline of acting rather than the acting itself. It is not the whole, rounded thing but a thing of shreds and patches mechanically combined to resemble the real article. Its ability to sustain a role lies not in the player but in the film cutters and pasters. Some of it is undeniably effective on its bogus

level, but, even so, you will notice that, particularly with the female performers, it is not the performances that are admired by the generality of film audiences but rather, for reasons that have nothing to do with the performances, the performers themselves, anatomically. It is thus that a screen actress becomes popularly successful not for any especial acting gift she may have but for the symmetry of her legs, the voluptuousness of her busts, the aphrodisiacal qualities of her figure, or some other such extrinsic attribute. To argue that theatre audiences are impervious to such charms would, of course, be foolish; but they want something besides, and that something is ability, or at least ability a bit beyond that of looking pretty, wearing clothes with the suggestion of having none on, and thus stimulating the libido of soda clerks, trap drummers and movie critics.

The stage offers them and their sisters a challenge. It lends them no "mixers" to modulate and trick their voices into audience acceptability. It does not provide them with an obliging cutter to make their possibly awkward gait take on an appearance of some ease and grace. It does not interrupt their performances with shots of the Salambria by moonlight to distract attention from the fact that they are unable for the time being to sustain them. It shoves them out before a critical audience and bids them to please it without assistance from any such chicanery. It is not an easy task, for them or for anyone else. It takes training, hard work and, above all, real talent. And you can not substitute for real talent a reputation born and bred in a press department, even if it is reinforced by several thousands of dollars' worth of gowns, an adaptability to cheesecake photography, spectacular alliances with wealthy Oriental loafers, and a face known to a million people.

We pass to three other emigrants from the screen, two from abroad and young, a third from the Hollywood lots and

of long film experience. Glynis Johns, one of the young ones, a personally attractive little bundle who entered our theatrical ken in Enid Bagnold's *Gertie*, purveyed a style of acting so excessively repressed as to provoke an audience's fear that she either was desperately ill or was entirely disinterested in her role. There were times, indeed, when she so overemployed the aloof and withdrawn manner that she seemed in imminent danger of vanishing from the stage altogether, like a prestidigitator's assistant in a disappearing act. She lacked entirely, at any rate in this her first appearance on the American stage, the alertness and drive which local playgoers so greatly admire and which, if the truth be repeated, they seem sometimes to confuse with vivid acting ability.

The second of the young ones, Audrey Hepburn, was introduced in Anita Loos' *Gigi*, adapted from Colette's novel of the same name. To the critical colleagues the young actress appeared to be everything in every way that could be dreamed. But, though I appreciate that the direction of her by Raymond Rouleau was here and there to be blamed, it struck me that she was far from being the paragon the aforesaid enthusiasts insisted she was. The role which she played was that of an innocent and unsophisticated girl of sixteen who rebels at the decision of her grandmother, mother and great-aunt, all cocottes and with the philosophy of cocottes, to have her follow their lucrative profession and who demands marriage as the price of her favors. Overlooking the fact that Miss Hepburn, though only twenty-two, was in appearance a rather mature female of some five-feet-nine in height, and overlooking as well the direction which propelled her into such a jumping over furniture and such a breathless sprinting about the premises as would better have suited a trained dog act—all apparently under the impression that human youth is indistinguishable from youth in the animal kingdom—there remained the girl's personal acting qualifications. These left one

much in doubt. Her attempts to depict innocence and lack of sophistication were left mainly to her eyes, which she resolved into the theatrically conventional coy droopings and questioning stares. When it came to suggesting the qualities inwardly, she found herself at a loss and resorted to so much calculated, outward mimicking of them that the picture was less one of innocence than of a histrionic sucking of the thumb. In brief, she acted innocence in accordance with the script's demands, but never for a moment was she successful in betokening it; and the consequent impression was of a card-sharper whose aces have caught in his sleeve elastic.

To continue the clinic. Various reasons have been assigned for the pains suffered by French comedy in its trans-Atlantic crossing and for its frequent failure to impress American audiences in any degree comparable to its effect on the home variety. Most of the reasons—translation sometimes, adaptation more often—are sound enough, but there is another which is often disregarded, and that is that, expert at times though they may be, it is quite beyond the nature and resources of American actors, let alone English, to achieve the tone and spirit of the French species and to afford the play the lightness of touch and style of delivery so all-necessary to its fizz and sparkle. What we generally and consequently get is ginger-ale acting in place of champagne—actors and actresses so affectedly self-carbonated in the hope of counterfeiting Gallic effervescence that the spectacle becomes a little ridiculous, like tipsy golf players and their wives performing the can-can at a suburban masquerade party.

Of all the non-French actresses I have ever seen, Marie Tempest was the only one who could insinuate a French sauce into her comedy performances. And among the men, only Leo Ditrichstein, not altogether surprising since he was Hungarian and since the Hungarians, and by that is meant chiefly the Budapest brand, more closely approach the French

in psyche than any other nationality, save perhaps in part the Austrian. The rest have almost always, to paraphrase the song, seemed to be doing what came unnaturally. They have gone through all the appropriate motions but there has been an inner greasepaint that has betrayed the forced quality of the pictures they were trying to present, and the result has been no more French than lobster *Américain* is American or filet of flounder, however artfully disguised, filet of sole.

And so it once again came about that André Roussin's triangle comedy, *Nina*, which in the original is lively and amusing boulevard fare, did not get anywhere on the local stage. What Samuel Taylor's translation and adaptation did not take out of it the performances of a company headed by the venerable film actress, Gloria Swanson, who was as out of tune as an attic harpsichord, and including a pair of British actors did. One of the later, Alan Webb, acquitted himself fairly enough as the wronged husband with a desire to do some wronging himself but neither he nor David Niven, and certainly not Miss Swanson, suggested for a moment anything Gallic. The men, though they bore the names of Adolphe and Gérard and tried their best to accommodate themselves to them, remained as English as fish and chips, and Miss Swanson's Parisienne clearly never got nearer to France than a Hollywood lot. There obstinately still remained a few comical passages in the play and there was still a small measure of entertainment but, so far as it much mattered, it might every bit as well have been laid in London or New York with its characters named Bruce, Bob and Bessie.

### III

Not since my college days when, fancying myself something of an athlete, I essayed skiing and on the first slide down the

chute cracked my knee against a tree that inconsiderately introduced itself out of nowhere, have I experienced such pain as befell me at Maurice Schwartz's one-man performance of a Brazilian item called *Conscience* written in Portuguese by one Pedro Block and adapted by a Canadian named Klein from a translation by an American named Vincent. Unable to endure the agony, I removed myself from the scene after an hour and spent the rest of the night in my bed dreaming rapturously of a theatrical heaven in which *Be Your Age* played nightly for years and in which the angels sang the score of Ken Murray's *Blackouts Of 1949* for decades on end.

Mr. Schwartz, as those familiar with his performances in the East Side Yiddish theatre are amply aware, is an actor of such unbounded virtuosity that he can act almost any role he plays out of all identity to anything even remotely resembling a human being. In his case acting is not an art but the opportunity for a personal circus and sideshow in which he does everything but eat snakes, and sometimes I am not sure that he does not also do that, judging from his facial contortions, profuse gulps and belly agitations. On this occasion he was at the top of his form and, though it had small relation to his materials, gave such an exhibition as I have not seen on a stage since, back in the last century, a performer by the name of Montgomery Turner, previously unknown to dramatic culture, showed up in a theatre on the Bowery, was seized with cramps in the midst of his single performance of *Richard III* and let out such screams and yells that two doctors who happened to be in the audience rushed up on to the stage and tried unsuccessfully to quiet him, while still groaning the Shakespearean lines and gesticulating like a bee-stung Bourke Cockran, with the technique presently known in non-medical circles as mugging.

The exhibit wherein Mr. Schwartz pleasured himself for the four performances it unaccountably lasted was an intermi-

nable and repetitive monologue in which, bathed in a variety of advanced pharmacy lighting, he lugubriously recounted the trials he had experienced with his wife and in-laws, the woes he had suffered at the hands of a woman he had consorted with in an attempt to forget his troubles, and the mental tortures incidental to his eventual discovery that the old home life had not been so vicious as he had imagined and that he himself was the schmo responsible for his own misery. The monologue, during which he periodically came down into the audience and passed around for inspection his personal calling cards and photographs of his dream girl (whom he moistly referred to as Eurydice) and of his children, was one long, tear-soaked wail punctuated with such extensive allusions to artists, composers, musicians, authors, poets and historians—it was one of his complaints that his wife had gone highbrow on him—that about the only name the script seemed to omit was Bunk Johnson. And throughout it our hero delivered himself of a repertoire of histrionic colics involving writhing facial muscles, frenzied hands and excruciating abdominal grindings the like of which were not witnessed, I dare-say, even in the heyday of Torquemada.

If Mr. Schwartz, whose dramatic art consists in holding the mirror up to Mr. Schwartz, wishes a constructive critical suggestion I advise him, the next time he puts on a one-man show, to take a leaf from the protean vaudeville performer, Owen McGivney, and afford us a little relief from lethal monotony by whipping off his trousers now and then, running into the wings, and reappearing in a crinoline skirt. Even if it does not quite fit into the dramatic pattern of his project, it would come as a godsend.

Contemplating the general matter of these one-actor shows, there is on the other hand not the slightest question that Emlyn Williams' reading-acting costume performance of selections from the works of Dickens is a thoroughly talented

and skilful job, but just the same I do not seem to respond to it as the rules of critical conduct stipulate I should. I duly appreciate that it deserves a highly complimentary notice, but I have to confess nonetheless that it is not my personal dish of tea, at least more than a half-hour of it. To sit in a play-house for a much longer period—two hours and fifteen minutes to be exact—listening to a single performer reciting, with histrionic embellishments, excerpts from a celebrated author is not, I fear, my idea of theatre or drama, or for that matter entertainment markedly superior to that of the lecture platform or a night club floor-show impersonations act. It may be that I am peculiar, but my attitude toward all these solo stage performers remains just what it always has been. I know that Ruth Draper, Cornelia Otis Skinner and such are accomplished in their particular lines and I am prepared dutifully to express the appropriate sentiments in critical print, yet watching them for a whole, long evening, efficient though they are, is, I find, a little enervating. After thirty minutes or so, you can have them. They are, to repeat, in their way meritorious, but there can be too much of a good thing.

Eccentric that I am, I feel much the same way about monodrama, or plays acted entirely by a single actor or actress playing a variety of characters. The expertness of the actor or actress is not enough. Stunts are all right in their place, but their place is a parlor or sideshow rather than a theatre stage.

#### IV

HAMLET, as everyone and his cousin knows, has been the subject of more theorizing than even the *Marie Céleste* and much of it has indicated all the insanity in the expounders that some of them have seen fit to attribute to the melancholy

prince. The catalogue of speculations has, seriously, included everything from schizophrenia to somatization or conversion, and, facetiously, the nomination as the reason for Hamlet's lunacy of the fact that it is not to be wondered at since he has been played by a thousand actors. Now comes Jean-Louis Barrault with still another idea which, borrowed from Coleridge, is that Hamlet's madness is just another name for his extreme lucidity, a theory that may well drive everybody crazy.

Barrault also has some ideas of his own. He believes that Hamlet is insufficiently sexually equipped to, as he expresses it, "have great business for women," that his father was like him in this respect, and that that explains why his mother has been so quick to marry his uncle. He further contends that the lasciviousness of the latter couple so disgusts Hamlet that his appetite for sexual activity would have been ruined even if he had had any. And he pursues the analysis with the notion that Hamlet's sensuality has found its outlet in his friendship with Horatio, "which is just as strong as his love for Ophelia." "But," he then timidly reneges, "there is nothing sexual about either of these loves." You may take the theory or leave it, as you will. But, though there is a measure of logic in it, it seems to me that Barrault shrinks from coming plainly into the open and saying that in his view the homosexual tendencies of the character are unmistakable. The disgust with his mother, the Horatio attachment, the rejection of Ophelia, the shock felt in the killings of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, all duly noted by Barrault, he seemingly elects to explain away altogether too delicately.

Though we have seen on our stage at least one English Hamlet that was clearly homosexual even if it was not intended to be, Barrault's appears to contradict his theorizing in being for the most part not only thoroughly and assertively masculine but so much so, indeed, that at times it becomes

musclebound. Whether the one way or the other, however, the role appears to be beyond his otherwise broad range and what we get from him is a performance that makes stabs at a target which with his almost every thrust seems to move away from him, almost as if it were a mirage. Some of the scenes, particularly those that permit some wry humor in the reading, he handles well enough, but where dramatic intensity is called for, he brings to his interpretation, aside from admirable clarity of speech and adroitness in pantomime, little more than greasepaint ferocity accompanied by such a repertoire of tortured face-makings as occasionally suggest the late Lon Chaney in his more acute moments.

Barrault may be able to explain his interpretation to himself, and even be satisfied with it, which in view of what he has stated in print is a bit doubtful, but the more analytical members of his audience have their qualms. His is, in short, a Hamlet of shreds and patches, ill-assorted, and one that on the whole seems to occupy the center of a seesaw and is nervous over its ups and downs. This is especially true of the early and middle portions of the tragedy; in the later he manages his equilibrium somewhat better, though even then it is a little difficult to reconcile some of his lightness of attack with the solemn materials, and a sense of stunt rather than one of soberly considered approach stubbornly persists. His eccentric interpretation of the role except in one or two particulars leaves one with the feeling that he is not sure either of it or of himself. He seems to act around it rather than into it and in the process indulges himself in such an overembroidery of pantomimic exercise, fiendish facial contortions and vocal tricks that the effect is sometimes of a fine actor uncomfortably trying to adapt his resources to some showshop thriller like *Dracula* and being pretty despairful about the whole business. And not only that, but finding his discomfort made all the more piercing by the rest of his company at the

same time disturbingly playing the Shakespeare tragedy.

It is not, as recorded, that he doesn't manage some conviction in a few of the scenes where humor of a sort is meet. It is rather that for the general picture of the Dane, even allowing for the Gide treatment, he uses so gaudy and splashy a histrionic paint-brush that any trace of subtlety is lacking and what we get is largely a billboard three-sheet. If his apology and idea are that it is the essential current of savagery in the Prince in what is elementally a barbaric court that he wishes to suggest, his stage direction of the play and of the other players, which is mainly the very opposite and indeed fairly genteel, confounds both him and his intent. While no bull in an approximate china shop, he at least offers himself in the light of a pirate on a cruise ship, and the result, to put it mildly, now and again resembles a bugle in a chamber quartette.

Though I am familiar with the French tongue there are, I confess, a number of passages in the Gide revamping of the tragedy that elude my grasp, and it is possible that at these points I am thinking of the original line in conjunction with Barrault's performance. So there may at such moments be some unfairness in my judgment of him. But small matter, since even valid minor exception does not, I think, absolve him on the whole, and that whole, while again demonstrating his rare precision of speech, his physical grace and his uncommon gift for eloquent dramatic pause, reveals him at serious fault and as an otherwise admirable actor far beyond his convenient depth.

The best performances in his supporting company are those of Jacques Dacqmine as Claudius, Pierre Bertin as Polonius, and Simone Valère, after a too pallid beginning, as Ophelia. Dacqmine, bereft of the whiskers that customarily give the King the look of Hamlet's mother's decayed uncle rather than of her husband and passionate lover, is for a change a vigor-

ous and plausible figure; and Bertin's fatuous old gabbler with a philosophical core is a relief from the more usual vaudeville chatterbox. The general staging, however, is so unimaginative and seedy and the lighting frequently so spasmodic that the production has a fly-by-night aspect. There are several other elements in the presentation that are questionable. The prefacing of the Ghost's entrances with something that sounds like the shrill whistling of a king's-size peanut vendor's cooker, together with such a walloping of drums as would seem to herald the return appearance on earth of John Philip Sousa, makes for unintentional comedy. The scene between Hamlet and Ophelia during the wandering players' business is furthermore conducted as if it had been reluctantly left in the text by Gide and is so indifferently done by Barrault that he seems enthusiastically to share Gide's hesitation. And the killing of Polonius and the conduct of Hamlet thereafter comes dangerously close to a Weber and Fields act.

The French repertory troupe has fully, as the French say, earned its beefsteak from us with its capital performances of most of the other plays in its program. But, so far as its *Hamlet* goes, it will, I vulgarly suspect, have to settle for a ham sandwich.

## V

ONE of the legends about theatre critics is that they never, or at least very seldom, agree on anything, except perhaps with themselves individually that they are always right and that such colleagues as may disagree with them are not only always wrong but are, to boot, asses of a very high order. I will not go too far back in the records to indicate that the legend has no more basis in fact than such other legends as that their bad notices are usually predicated on having shown up at the theatre in a state of inebriation bordering on delir-

ium tremens, on the circumstance that the playwrights or actors they derogate are for one reason or another personally odious to them, and on intestinal disturbances, the counsel of their wives, delayed risings of the curtain, or weather so inclement that they have been forced to sit through a performance with wet feet. But were I to go far back I assure you it would be even easier to prove that, far from being cats and dogs with one another, their opinions, whether sound or silly, have so frequently coincided that the other legend that they meet either on the sidewalk or in some convenient saloon to formulate their critical reactions seems to take on a logical color.

They agree so often, indeed, as to be rather alarming. There sometimes, true enough, may be one out of the lot who will qualify his praise or dispraise, but the rank and file of them will overwhelm the renegade. Consider, for example, the case of some of the newer young actresses in the last five or six years alone. On their first appearances there was such a unanimity of favorable notices for such as June Lockhart, Judy Holliday, Meg Mundy, Audrey Hepburn and the youngster Iris Mann, among others, in a dramatic direction that the bartender in that mythical saloon would seem to have worked overtime. And the same thing was true in the musical field when it came to girls like Isabel Bigley, Dolores Gray, Edith Adams, and several such. Though Lilli Palmer, Julie Harris and Barbara Bel Geddes found one or two cynics in their earliest appearances—in the first case, at least, inexplicably—the unanimous subsequent endorsement of them would appear to have intimated that the bartender must have had an assistant, and that he too worked overtime. And in the case of the somewhat older actresses there must surely in the guess of the criticphobiacs be no less than two or three additional barmen, all also working overhours. How otherwise explain the harmonious ravings over Shirley Booth, Beatrice Lillie,

Ethel Waters, the late Gertrude Lawrence and even Josephine Hull who has been giving exactly the same performance without the slightest variation for all of twenty long years? And there are others who will readily occur to followers of the reviews.

The latest dramatic newcomer to be celebrated by the Circles—only one who, incidentally, had whooped it up for her when she showed up a year ago in an off-beat little Greenwich Village theatre, slightly restrained himself—is Geraldine Page, onetime hatcheck girl, thread spool stacker, negligée model, and maid-of-all-work. And, lest you think I am going to exercise what legend insists is my penchant for being arbitrarily different, I wish to state that I string along with them and allow that she is pretty fine. I may not go with some of them in arguing that she is destined to be one of the leading ornaments of the stage in future years, since I am no clairvoyant and prefer to judge actresses and their performances as they come along; but her single present performance is freely granted to be an excellent one, which should satisfy her and her audiences sufficiently for the time being. Not only does she seem to have an uncommon equipment for a comparative novice, embracing a variety of expression, gesture and vocal modulation, but also the delicacy of spirit and manner of restrained intimation to wrap it up into a luminous bundle.

At this point, you will, if you have not yet seen her, imagine that she must be very good-looking and full of sex attraction, attributes which legend has long persuaded you are instrumental in persuading critics to give an actress much better notices than she deserves. But she hasn't any such attributes and is in fact a rather plain person beyond the rosy years of youth. Yet she has that quality which, when on rare occasions it manifests itself in the theatre, overshadows everything else and makes music. She may possibly be, for all I

can tell, a Jenny-One-Note. This may conceivably be her one big day in court, and she may never be able to repeat the impression she has now made. But, as I have said, only the future can write its own story.

The play in which this Miss Page has appeared—Viña Delmar's *Mid-Summer*—need not detain us. It tells a pulp-contrived tale, laid in 1907, about the worried and endlessly patient wife of a shabby school-teacher who longs to abandon a potentially secure life and taste what he imagines to be the glamour and riches of song writing and vaudeville. It contains a few squirts of amusement but for every such squirt a thick dose of cheap hokum, and in addition perhaps the most sentimentalized, bogus ending seen in the theatre since a half-century ago when, in a play whose name I have forgotten and would not want to remember if I could recall it, the final curtain came down on the decision of the hero to give away his considerable fortune because the young woman whom he was set upon marrying insisted that money would wreck their happiness together. (The young woman, I acutely do remember, did not, moreover, have a cent of her own.) Nevertheless, except in the noted ridiculous last scene, which involves among other things the inveterate business of fluttering confusedly about the stage, pulling open bureau drawers and frantically packing a lot of luggage preparatory to leaving her old diggings, the meanwhile mumbling happy little noises interspersed with exclamations of joy and fondly patting her bosom at such moments as she has to pause to catch her breath, and which would overtax the combined resources of an Edith Evans, Judith Anderson and Fanny Brice, the Page shines through the truck and gives it the independent illumination of her own person. Because of the materials she has been confronted by a doubly difficult task, and it is the more to her credit that she has been able to meet the challenge.

## APPENDIX

It seems to be the dreamy belief of actors, particularly such as have been celebrated for their looks and romantic charm, that a man's hair should become more and more luxuriant with the passing of years, the result being that when they are called upon distastefully to play characters of even middle-age they resort to wigs so thick, bushy and handsome as to imply that when the characters ultimately reach the horribly advanced age of fifty their locks will nevertheless have assumed the volume and length of the tresses of the Seven Sutherland Sisters. Vanity of course has its share in the business along with the belief, and it is thus that we had the otherwise commendable Rex Harrison appearing in *Venus Observed* as an ancient of forty-eight bedecked with hair not only of such voluptuousness as would discomfit a ten-year-old buffalo but tinted so fetchingly grey that it resembled a tureen of Escoffier's very special, mouth-watering potato cream soup.

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Like Harrison, Lilli Palmer is regarded by your critical servant as a player of much talent and attraction, but he wishes also to execute a small complaint about her in the same Fry exhibit. For some unknown reason she elected to appear in the act wherein she comes to the Duke's combined observatory and boudoir for purposes of an assignation outfitted in a Valentina creation of such excessively elaborate architecture and complexity that, were the affair to have got

under way, it would have taken her at least a couple of hours, together with the ministrations of several maids equipped with a variety of burglars' tools, to divest herself of it. I regret to remark that it reminded me of a certain well-known American actress of the early 1920's who, playing the role of a banker's wife in a second-rate problem play, appeared in one of the acts in a confection so closely approximating the grand finale of a circus that, when called upon to make an exit, not only couldn't she get through the door but was so exhausted from her sartorial burden that she tottered backwards and landed loudly on her pelvis.

\* \* \*

In the over-night failure, *Dear Barbarians*, we were vouchsafed considerable wayward amusement in a contemplation of the performance of an actress who in her day was considered, not without some warrant, a great beauty; her name, Violet Heming. Though still a woman of acceptable looks, she seemed so eager to relive her glamourous past and so determined once again to fascinate an audience with her historic charms that she cast any semblance of acting from her and occupied her efforts throughout the evening solely in a campaign to enchant the house *via* herself *in propria persona*. To this end she adjusted herself for most of the time in positions facing the audience and exuded allure with a resolve scarcely matched by even Gorgeous George, the Julian Eltinge of the wrestling art. Not only, in colleague Atkinson's apt word, did she flirt with the audience, but her flirtation involved such a repertory of arch *moues*, eye rollings, adorable smiles, leg displays and copious hypothetical shots of cantharides as we had not engaged since the taffy-haired little brat named Twinkle Watts, egged on by her worshipping mother visible in the wings, skated out onto the stage of an ice show at the Center Theatre and with her savagely coy assault upon the customers drove even men who unaccountably prefer chil-

dren to dogs clean out of their senses. If only Miss Heming had just played herself as she now is and had let us make up our minds about her for ourselves, she would have seemed very much closer to what she wished us still to consider her. Memory is sentimental in proportion to its lack of encouragement.

\* \* \*

I observe that Celeste Holm has been highly praised here and there for her underplaying of the role of Anna Christie in the O'Neill play of that name. That she underplays it is surely to be granted, but that the underplaying is entirely endorsable seems to me to be quite another matter. The role is a thoroughly emotional one and Miss Holm's underplaying of it is probably only a self-admission and confession of her inability to master and convey its dramatic emotionalism. It is an old acting trick, and it almost always fools the critics into believing that the player is so full of repressed emotional power that, were he or she to let go of it, it would crack the plaster off the ceiling, whereas it is rather only a camouflage for emotional incapacity.

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The casting of Harold Lang as the unmitigated bounder in the revival of *Pal Joey* has been criticized in some quarters as misguided on the ground that Lang is a smallish, slender, boyish-looking young fellow who would be inclined to attract the mothering instinct in women rather than the purely sexual.

Overlooking the fact that the objectors seem to think sexual puissance and magnetism are predicated wholly on physical bulk and height, a belief that history, the divorce courts and the police records have somehow frequently confounded, the mothering instinct may conceivably play a psychological share

along with the sexual in the attraction felt for the punk by O'Hara's married woman. In the movies, the character would, of course, be cast with an actor who looked like a cross between a hotel doorman and a football tackle. The stage can afford to be a little more intelligent and realistic.

\* \* \*

I learn from several of Laurence Olivier's English friends and acting colleagues that he has affected the absurdly aged makeup for the fifty-year-old Caesar in the Shaw play out of sheer, oblique vanity. Since much of his popularity and position in the theatre is due to the conception of him as a romantic figure, he has purposefully exaggerated the senile picture of Caesar so that his own lesser age will be hinted at and relished. It reminds my informants of a vain English actor of forty-odd years ago who did not have a hair on his head and who drew a thin black line of mascara across his forehead to make audiences think he was wearing a bald wig.

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Jessica Tandy's winning performance in *The Fourposter* is to be further congratulated on a small point that no one, so far as I know, has commented on. The play, as has herein-before been noted, covers a span of thirty-five years in the life of a married couple, beginning with the bridal night. Any other actress, with the full acquiescence of her stage director, would have indicated the passing of the years and particularly the later ones with—among other things—different powderings of the hair and varying colorings of hair pieces, culminating in all probability in a gray wig. Miss Tandy does nothing of the kind, or at best very little. Though she appreciates that the hair of a woman would change over such a period, she also appreciates that the woman, like most of her sex, would resort to tints, washes and dyes that would make

it look more or less the way it looked originally, and so shrewdly forgoes the chestnut business that would be indulged in by the general run of actresses.

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The elevation of Julie Harris to what is called stardom seems to make some sense, but the star label has been so miscellaneous pasted on actresses in late years that it has become ridiculous. Not only often doesn't it represent talent but even box-office draw, as has been witnessed in the cases of various Hollywood girls who have been presented to theatre audiences as dramatic stars, not to mention, indeed, a number of stage actresses who also in recent years have been tendered as such. Something should be done about it and, as usual, I am the one to come forth with a suggestion. Since the term star no longer signifies anything, being visited upon such actresses as Judith Anderson, Helen Hayes and the able like on the one hand and on such as Martha Scott, Nancy Kelly and the like on the other, why not in the interests of clear distinction a proper variety of celestial designations? Let us relegate the now over-used, meaningless and absurd word star to the fly-by-nights and call the really deserving actresses suns or moons. Thus, an actress like Uta Hagen would be a star but one like Edith Evans a sun, and one like Eva Le Gallienne a star but one like Flora Robson a moon. It may sound inane but it is not nearly so inane as the present system.

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Guthrie McClintic did a good job with the direction and staging of the revival of Maugham's *The Constant Wife*, at least up to the last moments when he converted the polite comedy into Olsen and Johnson farce, but why did he permit the fashionable Harley street physician in the person of Brian Aherne to dress the role as if the character were a suburban

osteopath? If Mr. Aherne showed up in Harley street's traditional black coat-striped trousers atmosphere garbed in the Knobby-Kut outfit he sported, he would have been chased out as a subscription agent for *Punch*.

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And so, pausing but momentarily to speculate why it is that many actresses so press the calves of their legs against the articles of furniture on which they sit that they assume the contours of oversize, overfull, squashy hot water bags, we pass gracefully to that savory nonesuch, Miss Mae West, about whom I have long observed something. However much the reviewers enjoy her performances and are entertained by her, they somehow seem to feel it incumbent upon them to apologize for the pleasure she gives them. What is responsible for their timidity is probably a feeling that she is not quite "nice" and that their gleeful appreciation of her so-called vulgarity, if frankly confessed, would lower their standing in refined circles; and the poor woman has to suffer from their hypocrisy. The fact, however, is that the West is an excellent entertainer—let us not go into any beside-the-point consideration of the acting art—and that when it comes to vulgarity she is no whit more vulgar than, say, Tallulah Bankhead, whom even the more punctilious colleagues are accustomed to embrace openly. Even were she as vulgar as legend has insisted, the further fact remains that vulgarity, or what is known as it, is part and parcel of the roles she plays and that to play them in any other manner would be illogical and stupid. The celebrated Lotta Crabtree was, by the record, just as unimpeachably and appropriately vulgar, and so was Rose Melville, and so is Cicely Courtneidge, yet no reviewers of an earlier day complained and, in the case of the last named, none of even the more fastidious English critics has lifted an offended voice.

The West lately showed up again in that classic of the in-

telligentsia, *Diamond Lil*, and not only showed up in it with all her established personal diamonds valued, according to the press department, at 876,415 dollars but with an added supply of "real Harry Winston jewelry"—again I quote the press department—worth 1,175,000. It was enough to numb the mind and stagger the vision, so if what I write hereinafter does not make much sense, you will understand.

Mae, unlike Ginger Rogers, for example, does not go in for any protean monkeybusiness but is content to come out on a stage, get firmly set, and play herself and herself only, with a ruthless nonchalance. And, as one of her more intellectual admirers, I wish to say that if she did anything else I'd steal undisguised by night into what is undoubtedly her 9,896,000 dollar bedchamber and shoot her. Moreover, I'd not only shoot her but, to make doubly sure, poison her if at any point in her show she rushed into the wings and presently reappeared as Ginger Rogers. I, among a lot of others, it seems, like Mae exactly as she is and am prepared to take her for better or worse till road bookings do us part. She is, I do declare, something. There is no one quite like her, which, I realize, may also be said of a zebra with polka-dots, but on her it is meant as a compliment. The only thing routine about her is her routine, which nevertheless fetches me just as much today as it did years ago when first she projected a saucy hip, screwed up her nose as if it scented a herring cannery, executed the hissing drawl that sounds as if she had lockjaw, and leered suggestively at the customers as if they one and all, including myself, were as inflammatory and desirable as Rudolph Valentino.

I am not going to enter here into any argument on the question of this Mae's gifts as an authentic histrionic artist further than to say that at acting sex she is a da Vinci. I am told that in her own person she is as foreign to the sexual aspect of her stage incarnation as an archdeacon. If that is true, her performance is a noteworthy achievement, so far

outdistancing the performances of her late stage colleagues like Olga Nethersole, Lenore Ulric, Valeska Suratt and other such snaky sisters that even a neo-Anthony Comstock would not be able to see them with binoculars. She has, to boot, the technical knack of laughing inwardly at the sex business and at the same time keeping it sexy. The girl, in short, is a grand show. Age cannot wither nor custom stale the infinite uniformity of her act. And I wouldn't change her or it for half a dozen trained dogs and Joseph Schildkraut.

## THE MUSICAL STAGE

EACH and every return of the durable *Oklahoma!* to the New York scene has been the occasion for a revival of the complaint that Oscar Hammerstein's lyrics for it and his other shows are in the main so sentimental that they make one feel as if one had swallowed a large bowl of violin strings boiled in sweet cream. In late years there has grown up a school of amateur but confidently assertive realists who regard as truly expressing human emotions only four-letter words and who are distressed that those like moon, love, home and the sort fall indecently into the same numerical category. They are as outraged by sentiment of any kind as they are by the hairless chest of Apollo, and they smile indulgently at the gentler feelings as being the mark of a milksop and a reflection on any writer who wastes his time on them.

Hammerstein, they should appreciate, is not writing lyrics for Strindberg, Wedekind or Kafka but for light, gay musical shows about fellows in love with girls, the joys of the countryside under clear, blue skies, the fun of clambakes, and similar minor pleasures of human existence. To ask him to interpret them in the disillusioned and bitter manner of a Gian-Carlo Menotti is as absurd as it would be if he actually did it. He writes warmly and simply and very appropriately of warm and simple subjects, and his relevant innocence is his charm.

One doesn't go to a musical show in the mood that one goes to a serious drama; if one does, one is dotty. One doesn't demand that the chorus girls look like college students, or that the bass drummer read Kierkegaard while he is walloping the drum, or that the lyrics sound as if they were written by Gorki.

There are, of course, grades of sentiment as there are of realism. Both may be carried too far and become ludicrous, objectionable and tiresome. The lyrics we get in some Broadway shows are as sickening in their treacle content as the realism we get in some novels by the younger bravos is artistically offensive. Both sentiment and realism call upon writers to exercise some critical restraint. Hammerstein, I think, has that restraint. More, he has a healthy humorous sense and a touch of pepsin that spare his lyrics the syrup we so often gag at in those of some of his colleagues. The fundamental truth about him is that he has something of the innards of a poet, whereas many of his competitors are merely commercial rhymesters. If presently he is the victim of the anti-sentiment fanatics, he may take some comfort from the fact that there are other good men in the same boat with him. I will not go into that phase of the matter here further than to mention one, Douglas MacArthur. It seemed to the fanatics that the General ruined what they allowed was otherwise an impressive speech by descending at its conclusion to the sentimental moisture of the old-soldiers-don't-die-but-just-fade-away business, and their sarcasm reached lush proportions. I content myself by asking them just one question. Opposed as they are to all sentiment, have they lately chanced to re-read Lincoln's Gettysburg Address or Washington's Farewell to his troops, both of which they have admired since boyhood? Or, for that matter, the New Testament?

It seems also to be their resentment that Richard Rodgers' music for the shows is strongly given to melody, which they look down on as being fit only for the ears of musical illiter-

ates. This prejudice against anything that is tuneful and does not sound as if the composer had poured a gallon of butyric acid into the piano is an increasing mark of the Newer Criticism and the toadies to it. True music, they believe, should not resort to such child's-play as melody but should studiously avoid it as it would the musical saw and other such passions of the moron ear. What they demand is music that does not sound much more like music than Gertrude Stein's prose, for all its rhythms, sounds like literature, or than the political oratory of André Malraux, for all its pulsations, sounds like sense. It does no good to suggest to them that Wagner, scarcely a Philistine, is boozy with melody and that Tin Pan Alley has cribbed ceaselessly and liberally from him—at least two of the best songs in recent musical shows stem directly from numbers in *The Flying Dutchman*; that it was the hardly microcephalic Schubert's hummable songs that made *Blossom Time* the gold-mine it was and is; that there is more melody in scarcely cheap Chopin than in any dozen ambitious Frank Loessers one can name; and that, to give even the musical saw its due—which is certainly stretching things to the limit—Heitor Villa-Lobos, the worthy contemporary Mexican, has gone the saw ten better with the most eccentric lot of instruments this side of a Johns Hopkins surgery or a kitchen utensils factory.

Rodgers, like Hammerstein, is not writing for the Metropolitan but for the lighter stage, and if anyone contends that lighter stage is more properly accommodated by the kind of music that keeps Olin Downes at his desk until six the next morning trying to think up reasons for admiring it, he is either ready for the psychiatrist or in line for a good job as a music critic. That lighter stage occupies the same position in music that the cocktail does at the dinner table; it whets, or should whet, the appetite for the better things to come; and Rodgers is one of the best cocktails served hereabouts. There is not

the slightest depreciation in the analogy, believe me. The lighter stage, after all, has given us the admirable Arthur Sullivan, the estimable Oscar Straus, Kalman, Lehár and various other such worthies. It has brought wit and charm and tears and laughter to audiences the Western world over, and has added immeasurably to our momentary happiness and contentment. It has given us the matchless waltzes of Strauss and the tender songs of Herbert and Kern and the delightful trivialities of the old Gaiety shows, and a lot more besides. And Rodgers, in his way, is singing as best he can in the old tradition.

There is criticism and there is criticism. One doesn't take a Uffizi mind to a tennis match or go to a musical show with a Brahms concerto in one's pocket. One goes casually in the spirit that one goes to a Springtime picnic or to call on one's best girl. And it is in that spirit that Rodgers and Hammerstein faithfully and so very happily serve it. Particularly are they to be commended for abstaining from an indulgence in the social significance deemed by some of their colleagues as desirable in lending a bit of weight to their shows. Only once, and then but briefly, have they succumbed to the temptation in the form of a racial equality song in *South Pacific*, and it was that single song that damaged the otherwise smooth current of their exhibit and irritated not alone their otherwise most partial critics but almost as much so the majority of their audiences. Social significance, or what is regarded as it by those members of an audience who profess to see in a patch on the comedian's pants-seat an analogy to the revolt of the downtrodden against capital is, they appreciate, surely as inappropriate to a song and dance show as an Ibsen plot or a girl with both her legs shot off. It is a dreadful thought, however, that now our social significance dramatists like Clifford Odets, Lillian Hellman and the like have abandoned social significance, it may be taken over by our music

show writers. That it has already been taken over by writers of the higher and more serious musical exhibits like Menotti, we know; and no particular complaint in that quarter. But if the time comes when the girls will kick up their indignations instead of their legs, when the tenor instead of going back to Maxim's will go back to Union Square, and when the heroine will start singing about Aneurin Bevan instead of about moonlight on the Caribbean—if that time comes, I shall buy myself a tambourine and stay at home.

## II

LEAVING, at least for the moment, the exceptional Messrs. Rodgers and Hammerstein, we come to the nature of the musical stage of the early 1950's in general, best illustrated by a reference to some of its exhibits in the various categories together with notes on the productions.

Thus, first, the transplanting of celebrated operas, as well as plays, of foreign origin and scene to the American deep South continued in the case of Verdi's *Aida* under the title *My Darlin' Aida*. As with *Carmen*, *The Cherry Orchard* and *The Lower Depths* and their Spaniards and Russians converted into denizens, black and white, of Dixie and their Latin and Slavic emotions and conduct attributed in paraphrase to folk below the Mason-Dixon line, we now had a similar metamorphosis of Egyptians and Africans. The *Carmen* resetting, as will be recalled, was plausibly accomplished, whereas that of both the Chekhov and Gorki plays stretched things so far that the results were preposterous. The resetting in the present instance had a measure of plausibility, at least as concerned the story line, but the attempt to keep up with the Carmen Joneses was otherwise hopeless.

The reasons were several. The book and lyrics by Charles Friedman missed almost completely the imagination and skill

of Hammerstein and offered in their places, despite the likely identification of the Ghizlandoni libretto with the Civil War period in the South, only a cliché-choked and prosy equivalent of one of those lesser musicals, usually derived from even lesser novels, that were seen on the stage of forty and fifty years ago. The Verdi music, furthermore, though the good Lord knows it has been borrowed often enough by Tin Pan Alley for songs about dear old Carolina and magnolias under the Tennessee moon and though there is no real reason why its Italian nature, replete in romantic musical hokum, should not serve nineteenth century Southern aristocrats and Negro slaves as aptly as it does their Egyptian and Ethiopian prototypes, seemed by virtue of the kind of lyrics accompanying it, let alone the dialogue leading into and from it, to be out of natural key with the proceedings. And the introduction into the show of wholesale pistol flourishings, Ku Klux floggings and Hollywood chases after fugitives, while it may conceivably have been reconciled with the new treatment of the book, somehow lent to the affair the refractory air not only of a *Tom* road show but of a *The Clansman* with a musical sound-track. The whole, in addition, was directed with so heavy a hand that even what popular "exaltation" might have been achieved by the Verdi music was depressed out of its possibilities, and the consequence was less the moving passion and tragedy of two ill-assorted lovers than a funereal contemplation of the minor complications of miscegenation.

The costumes and scenery by Lemuel Ayers and the staging and lighting by Hassard Short, profusely praised by the colleagues as is often their charitable wont in cases where they find themselves committed to harshness in regard to almost everything else about a show, were sufficiently accommodating in some respects but scarcely the materials for such raptures as were noticed in some quarters. The setting, costumes and lighting of the Southern mansion scene were admirable

and so were they for the boudoir scene and the hallway of the big house, even though they followed a perfectly conventional design. But the skimpy Square at the Boat Landing with costuming reminiscent of a marked-down 1890 soldiers-homecoming musical and lighting that suggested merely some yellow gelatine slides applied to the electrical equipment, along with such a surplusage of hanging moss in the woods scenes that the stage looked like a bargain fire-sale of tons of wet, imitation lace, certainly were nothing to inspire any ocular enthusiasm. The unnecessarily dismal lighting of the cemetery by the Negro church, particularly in the Ku Klux business of the second act and the subsequent death scene involving the lovers, furthermore became so impenetrably dark that one could barely make out the stage doings, save alone when one of the projectors that had gone askew threw an irrelevant beam on the border hangings. And the general direction and staging, while intermittently attractive, reached its nadir in the above-mentioned homecoming scene with a paltry handful of soldiers shuffling about in a sissified drill and being welcomed by some Hanya Holm choreography in which a number of bespangled acrobats out of an old Hanlon Brothers' show tossed themselves around the stage while a miniature Hermann the Great, black silk knickers, goatee and all, stood to one side, imperiously waved a wand, and caused a papier-mâché snake to pop out of a box.

Of the principals, Dorothy Sarnoff as the Dixified Amneris came off best in voice and the idiocratic species of acting required. Elaine Malbin's Aïda served in the vocal department for all an occasional dryness in the middle-register, but her acting, such as it was, was confined mainly to organizing her features into the horrific frowns, wrinkles and agonized patterns associated with greasepaint tragedy. Howard Jarratt's Radames, *alias* Raymond Demarest and here a captain in the Confederate forces, went Miss Malbin for all the marbles,

and won, in the facial contortion sweepstakes and presented so unrelievedly the countenance of a man bedevilled by woe that he took on the serio-comic appearance of an application of Emmett Kelly's lugubrious circus clown makeup. And William Dillard's Amonasro, rebaptized Adam Brown, vocally and histrionically was directly out of Aborn Opera Co. by Thomas Dixon.

The production cost something like 300,000 dollars. If they had put aside 100,000 of the 300,000 and had got Oscar Hammerstein to do the book and lyrics, spent 25,000 for a fuller orchestra and another 10,000 for more expert arrangements of the music, and laid out perhaps fifteen dollars on a Harlem fortune-teller to point out to them that you can not get anywhere in romantic musical drama unless you hire romantic actors to play and sing it, they might have had the success that they didn't have.

### III

In the way of revivals, *Four Saints In Three Acts*, the opera with music by Virgil Thomson and libretto by Gertrude Stein, again divided the two schools of criticism into a tug-of-war over its values. The school given to an ecstatic admiration of the virtues of be-bop jazz, acutely modernistic painting, verseless verse and similar phenomena of twentieth century culture privileged itself orgasms over it. The other, given to a perfectly open and liberal view of experimentation but preferring that it be invested with some discernible symptoms of aesthetic reason, looked upon it with a somewhat more bilious eye. Both gave due credit to Thomson's music, which is imaginative, ingenious and here and there witty; but, when it came to the Stein end of the collaboration, the tug continued to be accompanied by catcalls at best and ripe tomatoes at worst.

I myself am a tomato man, though let it be confessed at the outset that, for all her acceptance by various presumably in-

telligent people, I am prejudiced against the late Stein. Like most prejudice, it is quite possible my own is based on ignorance, but the ignorance in this case is in turn based on the Stein prejudice in favor of unintelligibility and the mistaking of meaningless and often absurd sound for ineffable poetic beauty. We are dealing here, let it be remembered, with the vocalized word and, while it would be ridiculous to demand that it contribute anything to human intelligence, since an opera libretto is hardly expected to perform any such function, it may at least be asked that the words make some faint sense, and so far as I can understand them they make little or none.

I hope I am no Philistine, but the alleged Stein genius still eludes my powers of perception. Her seeming belief that rhythm, if sufficiently mellifluous, is its own reason and excuse is like a belief that melody is the *sine qua non* of music and that anything else is wholly unnecessary and negligible. Her further apparent belief that the mere color of words in haphazard arrangement can produce a profound emotional effect is akin to a belief that a child's toy kaleidoscope is capable of producing a like effect. And her conviction that melody and color without meaning are superior art to melody and color with meaning would grandly dismiss as inferior artists such old-fashioned and outmoded writers as Shakespeare, Shaw and even the young Fry, whose poetry or prose is not only rich in rhythm and color but which in addition has meaning and sense. If perchance I misunderstand the Stein credo, I can only excuse myself on the ground that Miss Stein herself seemed not to understand it. Doubletalk I can sometimes fathom, but triplétalk is beyond me. The epitaph on her grave remains the most lucid thing which she has left to posterity.

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There is small question that George Gershwin's *Porgy And*

*Bess* is in many respects the best achievement thus far in distinctive American opera, but its undue length as staged by Robert Breen recalls the remarks of two of the dear departed. One, by Avery Hopwood, was that however late one gets to *Siegfried*, there seems always to be one more act. The other, by Jimmy Walker, was, "If you're there before it's over, you're on time." Both are apropos not the opera itself, but its production, which unloads upon it so excessive and superfluous a show that only its uncommon merit has safeguarded its survival. It is not that some of that show isn't attractive and here and there even invested with considerable throb; it is rather that the director, like others of his personally too ambitious ilk, does not know when to stop and, among other things, so repeats and overemphasizes his devices for exciting the stage movement that before the show he puts on reaches its half-distance point the average spectator is reduced to a state of nervous exhaustion. Six-day bicycle races may be all very well for Madison Square Garden but they or their relative equivalent are scarcely suited to an opera house.

In the belief that unbroken violence of physical action will best convey the primitive emotion of the Gershwin-Heyward work, Breen in large part succeeds instead in conveying what is only primitive theatre. That is, theatre which advocates the superior effectiveness of external galvanism over internal and that imagines audience excitement is to be derived less from stimulating materials themselves than from an inflammation of them from without. In other words, that the human ear is incapable of transmitting an electric current to the brain unless it is reinforced by the batteries of the eyes. The result in this case is, or at least was at the initial showing, that what natural high emotion the audience experiences from the Gershwin score and the Heyward libretto is attenuated, sometimes almost to the point of extinction, by the spurious ferment the director has dumped into and on top of it.

I am informed that the management's advisers, perceiving audiences' discomfort over the length of the performance and over the strain imposed upon them by the continual stage hysteria, have persuaded it to shorten the running time by curtailing the director's over-extension of a number of the scenes and, further, to calm down the general bedlam, all to the advantage of the exhibit. But there still remain, I am told, various elements that threw the opera out of key when I attended it and that were discommodious to it. One is the humorous scene involving the shyster lawyer's miscellaneous peddling of divorces among the colored folk, which is so directed into the low exaggerations of the burlesque stage that it seems as out of place in the surroundings as Sliding Billy Watson would have been in *Mamba's Daughters*. Another is the direction of Cab Calloway in the role of the concupiscent Sportin' Life, which allows him to indulge in such a ceaseless be-bopping of his corpus and so much Keith and Albee immoderation in the vocal department that the character fits more appropriately into one of Lew Leslie's old *Blackbirds* shows. Still remaining in the presentation to its loss is also the ill-considered staging of the long hurricane scene in a room set not far beneath the flies, which not only calls for a craning of the audience's necks that threatens a dislocation of the occipital bones but imposes such an increase in volume on the singers, lest the elevation defeat their projection, that their efforts are resolved less musically than perspirationally, particularly since the storm sound effects of all hell let loose add to their problem. The business of the opening and closing of the shutters in the Catfish Row shanties, repeated throughout a large portion of the performance, is in addition so forced that what was effective in the earlier productions of the opera becomes with the present endless reduplication as tiresome as the clinking of champagne glasses in provincial productions of Offenbach.

At least one of the production's weaknesses, the exaggeration of noise and physical turbulence, is perhaps in some measure to be attributed to the fact that it was prepared for European exhibition before this, its American showing, and that it was staged and directed to conform to the European theory that anything whatsoever of American origin must inevitably be possessed of such indigenous, uncontrolled and foaming deportment as would in any older and more genteel civilization embarrass even a hydrophobic dog. That the production was enormously successful over there not only with the public but with the critics only testifies to the producers' acumen in this respect. But it would have been more intelligent of them, when they considered the local presentation, had they remembered that, just as it is often necessary in the case of an imported and somewhat too quiescent English production to liven it up a bit for the American taste, so is it necessary in service of that same taste to modify at least to some degree the over-ebullience demanded abroad of our own shows and performers.

That, as I have said, the opera nevertheless triumphs over the excesses that have been superimposed upon it is a tribute to its virtues. The Gershwin score, now and again in the gentle Puccini vein or the more sombre Moussorgsky, still exercises its old emotional spell and, when in the more purposefully popular Gershwin, supplements the whole with a relevant humor; and the Heyward libretto, derived from the play, *Porgy*, comes pretty close to being perfect for the work in hand. The singing, too, save in one or two instances where value of voice has had to be sacrificed to value of individual Negro performance, is fully up to the opera's requirements, and is at its best in the cases of La Vern Hutcherson, although his performance of the crippled Porgy lacks any acting trace of the pathos the role requires, Leontyne Price as the harlot Bess, and Helen Thigpen as Serena. The settings by Wolfgang Roth, except

for the turn-table lofty room scene earlier mentioned, are excellent; and Alexander Smallens' direction of the orchestra is an important contribution to the occasion.

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Charles Spurgeon, the English curate, once remarked, "Alteration is not always improvement, as the pigeon said when it got out of the net and into the pie." Which text suits the occasion of the revival of that scumtedelicious Negro show of the early 1920's, *Shuffle Along*, now a catastrophic failure for, among other things, the reason the Rev. Charles pointed out to his parishioners some seventy years ago. Operating under the delusion, increasingly noticeable among our producers, that if theatregoers admired a show when they first saw it they will not admire it any longer unless all sorts of alterations are made in it, the present sponsors monkeyed the revival out of any public acceptance and right into the warehouse. The producing gentry, it seems, will not leave even the more or less classic drama alone and bring the creditors down on their heads by incorporating hula-hula dancers into *Peer Gynt*, transplanting *An Enemy Of The People* in an American setting, not to mention adding Damon Runyon lingo to it, and converting *The Cherry Orchard* into a magnolia garden. And, to paraphrase the old French saying, the more things change the less of it there is in the box-office till.

In their zeal to bring shows up-to-date the producers succeed not only in diminishing their original values but in making them even more out-of-date, like women's knee-length skirts supposedly made à la mode by sewing two feet of lace onto the hems. Thus, the injection of Stassen gags, Truman sports shirts, and the like into *Of Thee I Sing*, far from really modernizing it, only makes an audience doubly conscious of its age, as artificially colored hair and face enamel accentuate a woman's. And thus, when seven years ago its entrepreneurs

sought to liven up *The Merry Widow* by inserting a banana-eating comedian into it, not only did they murder the excellent operetta's chances on the spot but caused those seeing and hearing it for the first time seriously to wonder whether it had ever been what earlier audiences properly appreciated it was.

The sponsors of *Shuffle Along* miraculously admitted they had made a mistake in altering what was originally a gala show and announced they were withdrawing it until they could rectify their blunder which cost them the favor of the few paying customers and a load of money. If by any remote chance they ever put it on again, what they had best do is throw away all the many variations and present it exactly as it was in 1921. It is, if anything, a nostalgic show and you can not bring about any nostalgia by dressing up a favorite old aunt like a bobby-soxer. It is not enough to keep in just two of the spirited songs that in their day set Scott Fitzgerald to dancing in the aisle with one of the girl ushers, nor is it enough to preserve a single hot number in which the dusky belles perform as if they were afflicted with particularly acute cases of hydrophobia complicated by maniacal chorea. All the original stuff should be retained. Even if some of this stuff might conceivably now seem a bit oldfangled, it would not seem nearly so much so as the substitutions embracing a sand-dance, which harks back to 1895, several Tony Pastor musical hall ballads titled "Give It Love," "Farewell With Love," etc., a 1904 vaudeville skit in which a comedian on a mountain-top accidentally drops over the edge his sole remaining provisions, and a scene in a dressmaking salon with its parade of models that was already obsolete when Clara Lipman introduced it into a show at the old Herald Square Theatre back in the era of the free lunch and Bonnie Maginn.

It was, as I have said, an electrifying show those thirty-odd years ago—I went to see it no less than five times—and it might

still seem at least a good one if they left it with its story of small town politics instead of its altered one about an army post in Italy, with its imbecile Negro humors instead of its changed sentimental nonsense, and with its wild instead of politely tamed stage action. Audience excitement can not be generated, as the producers thought it could, merely by instructing the brass in the orchestra to blow the lid off the theatre, nor can a renewed audience laughter be stimulated by having a woman appear in a ridiculous dress and agitate its bustle.

Such producers bedazzle themselves out of their and their backers' money with the belief that the new generation of theatregoers is not interested in the past and must be catered to with stuff of the moment. The belief is faulty on two counts. First, present-day audiences are composed not of these younger folk but mostly of their elders; the proportion of customers under twenty-five to their seniors is overwhelmingly in favor of the latter. And, secondly, both younger theatregoers and older often indicate as great an interest in the past as in the present, indeed an even greater. Otherwise how account for the popular success of plays like *Life With Father*, *I Remember Mama*, *Years Ago*, and the kind? And how account for the enduring popularity of such old-timers as the remotely laid *Fledermaus* under whatever name it is produced, or *Show Boat*, or the before-mentioned *Merry Widow*, provided only yes, we have no bananas? But still the dimheads insist upon losing money by taking the originally delightful *Music In The Air* out of old Germany and quartering it, heaven and they alone know why, in present day Switzerland, by converting *The Beggar's Opera* into an up-to-date gangster whatnot called *Beggar's Holiday*, and by dressing the originally comical Negro yokels in *Shuffle Along* in GI wiseguy military garb. The few more intelligent producers, like those of *Pal Joey*, cash in handsomely by keeping the materials of the show intact and

simply improving the scenery, costumes, and one or two of the dance numbers.

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One of my various undertakings a quarter-century ago was the editing of a series of volumes called *The Theatre Of Today Dramatic Library*, devoted to the unearthing and publishing of new American and European play scripts that seemed to me to have critical merit. Though the series was supposedly confined to drama, when I came across *Of Thee I Sing* it made such an impression on me as a landmark in American satirical musical comedy that I dismissed the rule and included it, marking, I believe, the first time any such native script had been published in this country. And it came as a doubled gratification that not only, as everyone knows, was the show a great success on the stage but a surprising success in book form, the biggest seller in point of fact of any of the volumes that previously had figured in the project. The revival after a twenty year period afforded us the opportunity for a reappraisal of the show. Though it was gratuitously brought up-to-date, so to speak, in the alteration of the original allusions to the Depression, the League of Nations and speakeasies to things less untimely and though Stalin and Joe diMaggio succeeded Mussolini and Babe Ruth in the quips, the script save for a number of such minor needless changes remained intact, and it was agreeable still to find in it much warrant for one's early critical and editorial judgment.

There was some complaint that the show's second act presently didn't seem to maintain the pace of the first and fell off in relative attraction. That, however, was not anything new; it failed equally to sustain the spirit of the evening when the show was first produced. But it was still lively enough and on this occasion dropped a little more than it rightly should have simply because, unlike in the original production, the players,

good enough in the first act, lacked the resources to keep things going. There was a further reason. The first act is concerned almost wholly with a political cartoonery that is hilarious, whereas the second neglects it to a large extent in favor of the less galvanic materials of more orthodox musical comedy concerned with love and babies. The business, freshly approached and treated, is fundamentally amusing enough, but after the excellent satirical burlesque of national politics seems to run down a side-street and get a bit out of wind. There was also complaint here and there that even the first act's ribald animadversions on political shenanigan have lost some of their bite. This I can not agree with. I do not see that they have lost any more than W. S. Gilbert's have, whether in the way of politics or almost any other of the topical subjects which he spread with laughter. The Vice President joke is certainly one of the hoariest in the category of American humor and the fact that the Messrs. Kaufman and Ryskind have managed to make it funny not only once but for fully half the evening is surely a testimonial to their uncommon ingenuity.

What these two authors, assisted in part by Ira Gershwin in the lyric department and blessed with George Gershwin's admirable score, have accomplished, save for the noted periods of let-down in the second act, is farcical buffoonery of the Charles Hoyt order blown up into a show that, to repeat, set a fresh pattern for the American musical stage, much as the illustrious Rip set one with his political satire for the French revue stage. Familiarity, of course, often takes a greater toll of musical comedy books than it does of drama, and a second or third hearing of them, aside from the merits of the accompanying music, has a way of minimizing their quality in the minds of those given to criticism in terms of the calendar and the running clock. But, though it is readily to be admitted that the funniest joke in the world does not seem as funny after you have once heard it, the basic material of the joke, if it is

grounded on an element of fact and truth, remains something better than mere fun and takes on a degree of critical longevity. If it didn't, the humor of Congreve, Sheridan and others such would long since have become flat and profitless.

It seemed to me, before the curtain went up, that any comedian rash enough to appear in the Vice President role created by Victor Moore would be taking his very life in his hands, and when I noted in the program that it was Paul Hartman, a clown who hitherto had always depressed me no end, who was sticking his neck out, I privileged myself a *sotto voce* grunt. Hartman nevertheless was excellent in the role, creating it on his own and with no reference to Moore's performance. You could have knocked me over with a small feather. Jack Carson, though he got through the first act well enough in the old Billy Gaxton role of candidate for the Presidency, had nothing left for the second and seemed lost without the television and movie cameras that had served him in previous appearances before the public. Nor was Betty Oakes happy in the role of the White House bride originally played so pleasantly by Lois Moran. Strangely, too, Florenz Ames did not get the humor out of his old French Ambassador role that he got when first he anticked in it. But Loring Smith was capital as the newspaper tycoon behind the political skulduggery and several of the lesser roles had a satisfactory deal, though Jack Whiting in a succession of Senator, Supreme Court Chief Justice and other parts suggested only a chorus man in a variety of wigs. In conclusion, I might have wished that an otherwise well-staged show had not brought the semi-nude chorus ladies off the main stage onto the side apron where the absence of proper lighting and the proximity made them, previously slightly and acceptable, look like a lot of tired chambermaids.

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To pursue the rebirths, the revival of *Music In The Air*, the Kern-Hammerstein charmer of the early 1930's, still provided the theatre with a dulcet evening in spite of spotty casting and some changes in the book that were not for the better. One such, difficult to understand, was the already recorded alteration of locale from Tyrol and Munich to Switzerland and Zurich. What impelled the usually astute Mr. Hammerstein to make the change was possibly one or more of three things, all, it strikes me, senseless. If, first, it was his belief that American audiences harbor no fondness or romantic feeling for the lands of our enemies in the late World War, it would be quite as logical to transfer the scene of, say, *Old Heidelberg* or its musical derivative, *The Student Prince*, to Harvard. If, secondly, it was imagined that Switzerland and Zurich, independent of any such theory, were possessed of the necessary romantic flavor, Mr. Hammerstein can not have spent much time there or, if he did, must have experienced a deceptive glow from the native wines, which would indicate that he is either scarcely a connoisseur or was in a phenomenal psychic mood at the moment. And if, thirdly, he thought a revival of old Swiss comic opera costuming would today be very attractive, all I can impolitely reply is: "liberty cabbage!"

It is, however, a mark of the show's internal charm that it all does not too much matter, since, even so, it imparts a great deal of its original appeal to that share of gentle starlight that is in the heart of even the drabdest of us and which, if it is to be gratified, most often nowadays has to be searched for on our musical stage. The theatre, it should not be necessary to repeat, is one of the few havens of illusion left to us, and in a period when so much of its stage is given over to pitiless realism anything that serves as an opiate and as a reassurance

that there may still be a moon behind the clouds is jolly welcome, notwithstanding the derision of the determinedly logical. And it is the natural design and purpose of its musical stage, or at any rate it should be, to foster and encourage the lovable nonsense. This *Music In The Air* does just that, with a score embracing some soothing melodies (surely "In Egern On The Tegernsee" is one of the sweetest songs in all American musical comedy), a book that, while it has aged some and while it does not weather too close critical scrutiny, after all gets no more in the way of the score than the book of *Fledermaus*, a little horror if you bother to listen to it, gets in that of the lyrical Strauss, and with the frequent projection of a warm and tender and contentful mood.

That the public has a persistent hunger for romantic illusion was appreciated by Kern and Hammerstein in another day as it is appreciated by Rodgers and Hammerstein in this, and to the appreciation they have owed their great material prosperity. Every season some musical or other comes along that appears to believe the contrary and to imagine what a contemporary audience wants is rather brashness, down-to-earthness and Broadway vulgarity, and it duly fails. Even a show like *Guys And Dolls*, though its elements may be vulgar, filters them into the picaresquely romantic; even one like *Call Me Madam* protects itself from itself with an interpolation of mythical kingdom romance. Music, in short, is not the handmaiden of realism, nor is the musical stage properly a place for anything that doesn't welcomely divert us from our hapless, realistic selves.

## IV

If I may be so bold and so vain as to say so, the Phil Silvers show, *Top Banana*, at length vindicates this old pedant in a snug and nectarious manner. For the last forty years, whenever I have expressed the opinion—and I have expressed it with what I fear has been a saturating regularity—that old-fashioned burlesque was the most unashamedly hilarious form of entertainment the theatre could boast, the colleagues have superiorly hinted that I must either be out of my mind or was being affectedly lowbrow to attract some easy attention to myself. I have, of course, borne the obloquy in silence, as befits a hero, and have privately comforted my wounds with the thought that the otherwise matchlessly sapient fellows were either unacquainted with burlesque or were just plain, insensitive, obtuse and congenital dopes. But your prodigy has now at last tasted the sweet fruits of revenge. The show, which is composed from first to last of the basic elements of old-time burlesque and of all the old gags and bits of business, has generated in them such unbounded mirth as they apparently have not experienced in many a season. They have swallowed everything from the venerable hand-tangling bit to the more venerable dumb magic act as if it were the true Beluga and have smacked their lips with a relish hitherto seemingly reserved, albeit in lesser measure, for the wit of Bernard Shaw and the histrionic art of Laurence Olivier.

Several of the more austere confrères, indeed, have had visible difficulty in not falling out of their fauteuils when the female fortune-teller asks Silvers if he wants his palm read and, when he says yes, smears it with scarlet paint. And some others, known for their periodic impassioned pleas for revivals of the classics, have actually fallen out of theirs when the stooge with the couple of bottles insists to the vociferously

doubting Silvers that there are three and convinces him by counting off one and then two and triumphantly announcing that one plus two equals three. And all of them have exploded in what may be described as a plutonic manner over the Niagara Falls epic involving the pouring of water into Silvers' pantaloons, his bland indifference to the cataract, and his ultimate confounding extraction from his garment of a large rubber water bag. That I was right there on the floor with the boys of course goes without saying.

Such jocosities when set down in print obviously may not seem too killing, but when, in the famous burlesque tradition, they and the others in the catalogue are delivered by comics with the intense gravity that accompanies a performance of Aeschylus, they roll you in the aisles. And Silvers and his stooges, among whom are such artists as Joey and Herbie Fay, Walter Wahl, Johnny Trama and Jack Albertson, do full justice to them. The only things in the show that the august colleagues have found any fault with, in fact, are Hy Kraft's so-called book and Johnny Mercer's so-called songs which interrupt the proceedings. Well and good, they are entirely right. The book, dealing with the soubrette's incredible preference for a handsome young man to the goggle-eyed Silvers, is certainly nothing to occupy future historians of the theatre, and the music sounds like a jukebox into which someone has dumped a lot of gravel. There is, incidentally, also one of those ballets in which the participants perform the routine epilepsies and which concludes with the chief dancing pair jumping into a red-lighted pit, supposed, I take it, to be Hell. But, though it is all pretty awful, as the confrères say, it evidently has no more spoiled their picnic than it has mine. You can't have everything in the world and I, for one, am no hog.

Several seasons ago, Michael Todd made a similar effort to bring back burlesque in *Peep Show*, but failed in the noble attempt because he could not resist the impulse to gaudy it up

in terms of musical comedy, or at least what he seemed to think was musical comedy. The present impresarios have made no such mistake. They have thrown the rich old materials of the Mutual and Columbia Wheels helter-skelter into a grab-bag and simply left it to their clowns to pull them out and, without the further ado of irrelevant elaborate girl parades and big dance and musical numbers, to spray them at the audience. The only big number in their show, indeed, is one in which all the familiar figures of bygone burlesque are again brought to life, and it is a jewel.

I appreciate that among my clientele there may very likely be some who look down on the old art of Watson, Bickel and Wrothe as the predilection of simon-pure bums and who may shudder that a reviewer who pretends to respect the theatre's loftier manifestations should thus betray an Achilles heel. Very well, so I not only have the heel but probably, so far as the higher criticism goes, am one. Yet let me after all not be so generous and so greatly debase myself. I lay odds, if the police are not looking, of ten to one that, if the aforesaid snobs will condescend to hie themselves to the show, few of them will emerge from it not admittedly better off in soul for the experience.

## V

FEMALE comics, particularly the musical show species, as I seem to have been remarking for the last forty-odd years, or in other words since I accumulated a modicum of discrimination and polish, occupy in my prejudice a place very close to the music of Mendelssohn and veal kidneys. My disrelish of the girls, young or old, proceeds from three points. The first is that I do not see how what is usually an already far from

alluring woman thinks to ingratiate herself with an audience by freaking herself up, whether with makeup, costume or facial distortions, into something more frightening than she naturally is. The second is that, though the performer perchance may not be too hard to look at, the spectacle of any woman vulgarizing herself into a caricature of her sex is not, as I see it, overly pleasing, even I daresay to a misogynist, if sober. And the third and most important is that, at least the way I react to the breed, the poor souls for all their blood, sweat and grimaces are not at all funny, at any rate for more than a moment or two.

I may, if I must again reluctantly admit it, be peculiar, but in all the long years I have been auditing such creatures I have not, with at most one or two exceptions, found anything remotely amusing in their antics. The great majority of them seem to have fallen into two groups, both more or less revolting. One has been what may loosely be called the May Vokes cluster. This has consisted of females who apparently have committed themselves to the theory that, if the hair is done up in pigtails so wired as to lend them the appearance and movement of indignant reptiles and if every other line of dialogue is accompanied by a tug at cotton stockings, preferably white, that are constantly falling down, the result will be so convulsing that an audience will expire from laughter. The other, which may be described as the Charlotte Greenwood school, has been constituted of elongated, scrawny females who in turn have sacrificed themselves to the doctrine that the height of hilarity is achieved by lifting their long legs and poking them out to the right and left and by accompanying the comedy gem with such a face-making as would scare the hell out of a monkey. There is perhaps yet a third and additional group. This has embraced what may be termed the more refined species and has listed in its personnel performers who have dismissed most of the physical didoes of their sisters,

along with the latter's extravagances of makeup and costume, in favor of exotic vocal tricks, periodic sudden backward thrusts of their posteriors, and pregnant pauses in delivery designed to permit the slower-witted among their auditors to catch onto and digest the wholly obvious content of their facetiae.

By way of relief from the general run of these poxpot past and present we welcome the reappearance of the exceptional Beatrice Lillie, who has lately been frisking in what she regards as the best of her songs and acts gathered from the shows in which she has performed over the last two decades. It may be true that an entire evening of even the most acceptable lady comic is something of a challenge and that, however entertaining one such is, there inevitably come times when the too-much-of-a-good-thing feeling overcomes one, and I trust I may be forgiven for allowing that the feeling permeated me on this occasion. But, suppressing it critically, as befits a gentleman and a scholar, the fundamental virtues of the Lillie become unmistakable. It may also be true that even she adheres to some of the clichés of the third group mentioned and that the routine vocal squeal, bottom toss and over-worked pause and glare figure in her comedy equipment. But they are minor facets of it and, like occasional stray grains of sand, do not spoil the essential taste of the oyster. For what she brings over-all to a performance is style, the suggestion of a mind nimbly operating its criticism upon her materials, and an innate drollery of spirit in contrast to the externally imposed drollery of the usual female clown. Without a personally funny look, she looks fun into her materials, and without reliance upon such customary stage implements of humor as absurd costume, grotesque hair-dos and physical exaggerations she projects humor, it may almost be said, chiefly through inference. What she is, in brief, is a dramatic comédienne disporting herself in the field of revue and musical comedy.

The show which she heads is named, hardly with an excess of imagination, *An Evening With Beatrice Lillie*, and to minimize some auditors' impatience with too much star inserts Reginald Gardiner as an occasional pinch-hitter. He is an amusing fellow of the parlor entertainer type that such polite British comedians suggest and, though his so-called imitations of inanimate objects are rather bald by this time, still serves. The whole evening, indeed, is of the "polite" species, which means simply and only that the performers are English, have softly modulated voices, do not indulge in such locutions as "Is zat so?" and wear evening dress. In this case, however, the modulated voices and evening dress are accompanied by talent, which makes the difference, and the exhibit justifies itself, at least in the case of those theatregoers who decline to regard as good pastime anything that does not substitute noise, acrobatics and Broadway "punch" for wit. For all these mellow words, however, I would still prefer the Lillie with a more substantial show around her. Though to me she is sufficiently prodigious as she here is, I would nevertheless like her even better with a little more entertainment contrast. I am old-fashioned that way, and I would not get in the least upset if her acts were interrupted and supplemented by, say, a line of pretty dancing girls, maybe thirty or forty, and possibly a couple of impolite low comedians who swatted each other over the nose every once in a while with a copy of the *New Republic*.

## VI

It was quite evident not only from the many postponements but also from the bringing in of new sketch and other writers to supplant the previous new sketch and other writers who supplanted the writers who had preceded them, that the Messrs. Russo and Ellis, whose *Two's Company* at last saw New York production, started out with nothing much more

in the way of a revue than Bette Davis' promise to appear in it. Just why Miss Davis so overwhelmed and excited the gentlemen, aside from the fact that she is a well-known movie star, was hard, once the show opened, to make out. That is, unless you figure that most of our producers are enthusiastically convinced that all that is needed to pack a theatre and begin counting up the profits is some well-known movie star like a Ginger Rogers, Olivia de Havilland, Ann Sothern, Marsha Hunt, Constance Bennett, Annabella, Viveca Lindfors, Gloria Swanson, Veronica Lake, Claire Trevor, Margaret O'Brien, Glynis Johns or Signe Hasso, among a number of others, who on her stage appearance does no business whatsoever or at best very little.

Whether Miss Davis would or would not draw enough theatrical trade to justify the Messrs. Russo and Ellis, ultimately pay off their and their backers' heavy investment in her and make money, depended on two things. If it was talent that alone counted, one was privileged staggering doubts. If, on the other hand, theatregoers, as the producers hoped, would be overcome by a rabid curiosity to have a look at a screen luminary, everything would be well. But either way the occasion provided us with renewed testimony to the peculiar fact that our theatre people seemingly have all the admiration for and envy of the movies that they privately pretend not to have. We need not look farther for confirmation of their attitude than the eccentric decision of the so-called Council Of The Living Theatre to make and promote the film, *Main Street To Broadway*, in the full faith that it would assist the theatre and recreate theatregoing on a prodigal scale. Aside from the point that they do not seem to have heard that the moving pictures on the whole are on the fast down-grade and are already loudly crying uncle, their theory that people who still go to and cherish the movies are potential theatre-audience material is something to induce plenty speculation of a toxic nature.

It is true that an occasional screen star, male or female, attracts theatregoers just as it is true that an occasional plunger at the racetrack comes home with some winnings. But the average is not better, at least in the former case where we have available statistics, than one in ten, which surely is not a plenitude. At this writing there were, not counting *Two's Company* the one way or the other, eight real musical successes on the local stages and in only one of the lot was there a movie name. And as of this writing there were ten successful dramatic exhibits, eight of which had solely legitimate players and two of which contained one lesser film player apiece in secondary, if featured, roles.

Miss Davis, who has earned Hollywood's kudos in the shape of more statuettes than adorn the graves in even a Tyrolean cemetery, unfortunately indicated no slightest competences for the musical stage other than an ability to give a likely imitation of Tallulah Bankhead which, while Tallulah Bankhead herself has been giving it successfully for years, may scarcely be said to constitute in itself a career for anyone else. Except for this mimicry of the throaty voice and impertinent manner of the Bankhead, Miss Davis seemed to have nothing to contribute to a revue. She can't sing; she can't dance; if perchance she has any gift for comedy she afforded no inkling of it; she wears clothes other than the grotesque sort with no suggestion of style; and—here, I fear, I must in duty bound descend to the personal—she haplessly possesses features (like mine, I am told) that uncontrollably lend to her face the appearance of simultaneously having broken a lower right molar on a hard piece of rhubarb and smelling something that horrifies her nostrils. She was not, in short, very good, though enormously willing. She was cautiously provided with numerous opportunities to make fun of herself and to minimize her talents, but instead of ingratiating her with an audience, as was the intention, they only had the effect of calling a doubled notice to her inadequacies.

The show in which she disported herself may be described in general as the kind in which almost every song number is inevitably either accompanied or directly followed by the antics of a pair of dancers, sometimes more. It was also the kind that, in this case wisely, is apologetically introduced by a comedian with whimsical allusions to its defects. There was so much of this apologizing in both this and Miss Davis' direction, indeed, that there were times during the evening when one expected the management imminently to refund the audience's money.

It is pleasant to note, however, that the exhibit contained a few things that needed no extenuation, though most of the music by Vernon Duke and the lyrics by Ogden Nash were not among them. Two of Jerome Robbins' ballet numbers were imaginative and attractive, and Nora Kaye's dancing was expert; the Messrs. Horwitt's and Rogow's sketch about a scene-stealing brat in conflict with a vainglorious actor, hilariously played by David Burns, was a corker; and Sue Hight was a pretty singing girl. But if the producers wished to make their apologies all-inclusive they should not have overlooked additional stage comments on a number in which Sadie Thompson was again and belatedly travestied; on another again parodying hillbilly singers; on still another in which again an obstreperous and voluble female discomfits the audience at a show; on the Miocene business of a bare stage gradually transformed into an appropriate theatrical background for a song and dance number; on the stereotyped ditty about the feeling that Spring is in the air; on the droll Hiram Sherman's total lack of material; on a stupid lampoon of Saroyan; on yet another frayed skit about a passionate Italian movie director; and on the rainy day in the park ensemble number which always saves money because all it calls for in the way of costuming is a lot of those five-dollar plastic rain coats that the girls can slip on over their other dresses.

It was, in conclusion, clear that Miss Davis, not content with her screen estate, like other of her sister luminaries bethought herself of that theatrical goal which is the secret aspiration of her species, and bethought herself further of the most sagacious means wherewith she might safeguard herself from the failure which had been the portion of various film eminentæ who had preceded her. Since she is evidently a shrewder and more intelligent woman than her hapless predecessors, she doubtless confided to herself that, though she had won her position in the pictures as a serious dramatic performer, it would be a very clever move not to challenge the stage in that direction and risk the defeat suffered by her Hollywood colleagues like Olivia de Havilland but to surprise the theatre by offering herself in a wholly different guise. The guise, she concluded, was as a musical comedy or revue actress, but what she seemed carelessly to overlook was the necessity for some ability in even that medium and, totally devoid of it, her collapse was as bulky as that of those of her West Coast friends who had stuck resolutely to their idea of themselves as dramatic actresses.

Miss Davis, in truth, revealed herself as the Olivia de Havilland of the musical stage. She has, in addition to her other deficiencies mentioned, nothing of the stage presence and gift for projection that sometimes help partly to gloss over one or another of the absent attributes; and she lacks the kind of looks that have been known on occasion to wobble an audience out of a too great consciousness of what the performer hasn't otherwise got. In this juncture, she simply blacks out a couple of her front teeth, sticks a pipe into her mouth, and hence is a hillbilly; puts on a bedraggled feather hat, swings a parasol, and hence is Sadie Thompson; dons a faded old house-robe and flat shoes and musses up her hair, and hence is a character out of the slum type of drama; and similarly runs into her dressing-room and re-emerges as nothing more

than Bette Davis imagining she is a protean comedienne.

The misguided lady managed to attract trade for eighty-nine performances, but I hope I am not too guilty of rudeness when I express the belief that it was attracted mainly by something approaching a cruel curiosity, much as in past times it was attracted to John McCullough, Corse Payton and the Cherry Sisters. In other words, not by an expectation of talent but whimsically to delight in the courageous demonstration of a lack of it.

## VII

INDEED, until *Wonderful Town* appeared, the American pride in its musical shows lately suffered such a deflating as resembled an appendectomy performed upon a cheese soufflé. One of the exhibits contributing to the reduction of the chest expansion was *Hazel Flagg*, which was still running at the time of writing and hence seemed to indicate that Barnum was right, and the other was *Maggie*, which was forced to close after only five performances and indicated the contrary. The former was derived by Ben Hecht from a movie scenario he wrote back in 1937, which was derived in turn from a story by James Street, which in double turn was derived from Mr. Street's seeming notion that the idea of a young woman swindling tender-hearted people into a belief that she was in dreadful pain and dying was a particularly hilarious one. Mr. Hecht, in order to make things appear a little high-toned, introduced a note of what Broadway, like Hollywood, elects to call "satire," which in this instance took such forms as allowing that a weekly magazine could triple its circulation and advertising revenue, even as late as the 1930's, simply by describing New York's reaction to a girl who had only three weeks more to live and that consequently, as was somehow waived aside by Mr. Hecht, could not possibly in view of its time and printing

schedule cover more than a week, or at the very outside two weeks, of the story.

This Hecht in the earlier years of his career was one of the brightest writers of novels, short stories and plays in this country, but something began happening to him some time ago. Just what it was, unless it was Hollywood, I do not know, but whatever it was it seemed to poison his talents. Surely the Hecht of those earlier years, the humorous and cynical Hecht of novels like *Erik Dorn* and plays like *The Egotist* and *The Front Page*, was far from the Hecht of today who can write a preface to a play like F. Hugh Herbert's *The Moon Is Blue* in which he seriously compares the author's humor with the best of Shaw's and the author himself with Molière, and who further seems to believe that Shaw's wit has succeeded with audiences "only after time had removed its timeliness."

The show, that reached its highest favor with an audience in Jack Whiting's singing of a burlesque George M. Cohan number called "Every Street's A Boulevard In Old New York," which gives you an additional idea of the general "satirical" voltage, was the kind that rushed the chorus onto the stage whenever things began to sag, which was often, and had it merchant the customary tempestuous dancing to an explosion by the orchestra brass. What the program announced was music was the product of Jule Styne, the lyrics for which were discredited to Bob Hilliard. The title singing, dancing and speaking role was handled by Helen Gallagher who did sufficiently well by it but who was kept on the stage so over-much throughout the evening that the management could have picked up an extra tidy dollar by renting out her dressing-room to a bookie.

*Maggie* on the other hand was almost equally as poor on the same hand. Though it abstained from "satire," its theory that Barrie's *What Every Woman Knows*, on which it was based, might provide apt materials for a musical show consti-

tuted satirical criticism not only of Hugh Thomas, who was responsible for the book, but of the Messrs. Gilbert and Fearnley, who produced it. It is conceivable that if they had cast a good comedian in the role of the sourly humorless John Shand instead of a straight singing actor like Keith Andes and had put a comedienne like Mary Martin into the role of Maggie Wylie instead of the more or less straight Betty Paul, whom they went to all the trouble of importing from England, things might have been more acceptable. But, as they stood, the Barrie story only got in the show's way and the blocking was materially assisted by William Roy's tunes and lyrics; by introducing into the proceedings some inordinately arch and offensive gutter antics, including cheap sex quips and a rheumatic shimmying of the torso, on the part of Odette Myrtile, that souvenir of the distant past; and by some of the most un-exhilarating dance numbers, including the usual dream ballet in which several dancers represented the principals in the plot and an item in which three hoofers ran around the stage wielding butterfly nets and cracking one another over the head with them, that have been seen on the New York stage since R. H. Burnside had the elephants doing a polka in one of the old Hippodrome shows.

*Wonderful Town* is a different story. Based by Joseph Fields and Jerome Chodorov on their amusing farce-comedy, *My Sister Eileen*, musicalized by Leonard Bernstein, choreographed by Donald Saddler, decorated by Raoul Péne du Bois, directed by George Abbott, and played by a troupe headed by the movie star, Rosalind Russell, and the television girl, Edith Adams, the show from start to finish is an electric pleasure, fresh, humorous, tuneful, good-looking and at moments even rather exciting. The story of the two sisters, one the practical sort, the other blonde whistle-bait, who come to New York looking for careers and land in a Greenwich Village cellar room previously occupied by a lady of joy, is for the most part perfectly suited to the musical form and, where here and

there small changes were necessary, the authors have not only happily maneuvered them but have actually improved upon the original. And Bernstein, abjuring the kind of stuff that depresses the average music show with its hackneyed din, has contributed songs both witty and tender, with lyrics by Betty Comden and Adolph Green that are not only independently alive but that further the story and stage action.

After Bette Davis, the thought of another inexperienced screen star disporting herself on the song and dance stage was not too encouraging, but Miss Russell has met the challenge quite sprucely. It isn't that she can do much of anything in the way of singing and dancing, but she nevertheless does what she can't do delightfully and is always quite captivating about it. Miss Adams is a windfall, and no mistake about it. She acts the Lorelei Lee role of the dumb but prehensive blonde sister to the queen's taste, sings nicely enough, and if her dancing is not anything to arouse the envy of Alicia Markova or Bobby Clark it is still good enough for the purpose. And the rest of the company, which includes George Gaynes, Dort Clark, Jordan Bentley, Henry Lascoe and Cris Alexander, not to mention an anonymous chorus virgin to whom in other and better days the town's beaux would have tendered nightly champagne suppers either downstairs at Delmonico's or upstairs at Sherry's, is just what it should be.

There are, further, the dances. These, true enough, are sometimes of the sort given to identifying a more or less hydrophobic activity with terpsichorean grace, but in this case they at least fit relevantly into the show's pattern and movement and are not mechanically inserted into it, as they are, say, in *Hazel Flagg*, solely in a despairing effort to introduce some pulse into an otherwise moribund stage; and one number, the wild, throbbing one that figures as the Greenwich Village honky-tonk finale, is, it seems to me, one of the best things of its demented kind we have had in several years. Since we are passing around compliments, here is one as well for

Mr. Abbott. As theatregoers need not be reminded, it has often seemed that his directorial technique has confused mere outward speed with inner vivacity and that instead of stimulating the senses he has consequently rather only tired the attention. Here, however, he has substituted a well-considered pace for the former arbitrary hustle and bustle, and the result is salubrious. He keeps the show going on its own without too much of his former Steeplechase Park goosing, and it is a happy and welcome change from his established paroxysmal routine.

While the book of the show follows closely the play on which it is based, the changes that have necessarily been made in it for music show purposes are, as observed, all to the good and the lines and business, along with a jail scene, that have been added to it prosperously increase its humor. There may now and then be a rusty wheeze, such for example as inquiring of a young female applicant for a night club job if she strips with the observation that people always like to see a new face, but they are few and far between and most of the comedy is new-fledged and pretty delicious.

There is a temptation, which I shall politely resist, to enter into a comparison of Miss Russell with Miss Davis, that other Hollywood celebrity who, as mentioned before, earlier in the same season similarly ventured into the music show medium. But if I did not resist it, I would point to Miss Russell's success and Miss Davis' failure on the score not so much of any remarkable difference in degrees of factual talent as on the quality of the Russell in her own person, on what seems to be her natural ability to warm a theatrical audience to her, and—whatever else she may lack—on her modest but influential manner, style and stage address. So what we have all around is, to use an adjective strange in the circumstances, not only a gracious show but a very funny, melodious and fascinating one that, while it surely will not go down in the record as one of the glories of the American musical stage, is certainly a big morning-glory in the immediate otherwise flowerless garden.

## APPENDIX

MUSICAL shows about adolescents are generally foreign to my taste. Most often they are either so extravagantly naïve and cute that one might get an equivalent enjoyment by sticking a finger down one's esophagus, or they are so brashly intent upon offering their brats as rivals of Ethel Merman and Ezio Pinza that the only childlike thing about them is their producers' gesture in that direction.

\* \* \*

I am still living in the hope that the day will finally come when no revue will contain the number in which a woman in a black satin dress that accentuates her rear embonpoint stands under a lamp-post and wailingly vocalizes her disappointment in the male sex and that further will not open its second act with a rose-bower setting in which two young lovers drool about the everlasting quality of their affection the while another young couple waltzes dreamily in the background. And, in my more optimistic moments, I also live in the trust that one day I will see one that will not contain a ballet which is plainly about nothing more than the lust of a man for a woman, or vice versa, but which I am requested to imagine is about the search in the present ruins of civilization for an abiding faith. I hope that I may also be forgiven a prayer that I have seen the last of the conventional musical comedy Western dance hall scenes the chief feature of which is a woman who executes a can-can with such ferocity that it scares the daylights out of even alumni of the old Bal Tabarin; the last bit of business in which someone tries to read a document upside

down and someone else turns it around for him, whereupon he mimics an astonished satisfaction; the last of the business in which a character gulps down a slug of bad whiskey and splutters like an agonized garden hose; and the last lyric involving the holding aloft of a man's garment by a girl singer and her sentimental lament that her absent lover is not in it.

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The local indignation over the London critics' castigation of *South Pacific* is as meritless as would be any London indignation over the New York critics' low opinion of some such English exhibit as Roger MacDougall's *To Dorothy, A Son*. The circumstance of the critical prosperity here of the musical play and over there of the comedy has nothing to do with the case, no more, in fact, than the preference of the American for hot dogs as opposed to the Englishman's for kippers; nor, further, has the local view that *South Pacific* is an excellent show and that *To Dorothy, A Son* is an extremely poor one as opposed to the English that the former is not much good and that the latter is very amusing indeed. The theatrical differences in taste have now been in operation for years and will doubtless continue to be for years to come, and not much can be done about it. In many ways there are not two more dissimilar nations on the face of the earth and to argue that one is right and the other wrong is senseless, at least much of the time.

I will not say anything of the promptly collapsed *To Dorothy, A Son* other than to express my personal critical opinion that it was dreadful claptrap dealing with the musty plot about the baby who will inherit a fortune if born within a specified time limit. Why English audiences have relished it, I no more know than why American audiences have relished even more some such local dose of claptrap as *Time Out For Ginger*. But, though we esteem *South Pacific* as an admirable show and though the English proportionally disesteem it, it

is not hard to deduce the contrary British attitude. In the first place, the theme of acute racial prejudice in the matter of a young American woman's bitter reaction to a Frenchman who once was wed to a dark-skinned South Seas native naturally impresses the English as silly, forasmuch as wide travel and residence in the far corners of the globe, together with an adaptability to *mores* as they find them, have rid them of any such feeling. But even more to the point is their unacquaintance, in this specific case, with such primitive back-reaches of the United States as Arkansas, where the priggish school-teacher with her antagonism hails from. If, with perhaps a single exception, there is currently a practising London dramatic critic who ever explored the varied peculiarities of the American scene much farther west than Dinty Moore's or much farther south than Keen's Chop House, I have not heard of him.

In the second place, the brag and bluster of the show's United States Marines is unquestionably offensive to the English critics, who like to think, however much they may pretend the contrary, that if it were not for their own soldiery, whether on land or sea or in the air, we would long ago have been speaking German or Japanese as our national language. In the third place, such a key song number as "You've Got To Be Taught To Hate" strikes them as being quite as violative of the show's flow as it struck the New York critics. In the fourth place, the appropriation of the *Madame Butterfly* theme in the secondary love story of the young naval lieutenant and the Tonkinese girl occurred to them just as it did to some of our critics. And, in the fifth place, though they liked the Rodgers score, they probably, as the local critics did not, here and there recognized some of its inspirations as, for example in the "Bali Ha'i" song, Saint-Saëns' second concerto in G minor. (Saint-Saëns has surely stood some of our composers in good stead, as witness, among others, Gershwin and his "Rhapsody In Blue.")

It is claimed that the advance build-up of the show, together with an anti-American attitude, operated further to its critical disadvantage. The advance build-up of *Oklahoma!* did not seem to influence the same critics against it, nor did any anti-American attitude. It is perfectly true that the English do not like us, but the dislike has not kept their theatre critics from wholeheartedly endorsing some of our plays and shows and some of our actors and actresses, let alone vaudeville performers, who have played over there. If those critics occasionally do not like one of our products, it no more testifies arbitrarily to any prejudice against us than our own dislike of some of theirs testifies to any conceivable dislike of the English on our part, even though, to be quite honest about it, a lot of Americans not in the White House are not too crazy about them. The London critics simply did not care for *South Pacific*, and that is all there is to it.

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The celebrated French criminal who some years ago was accused of murdering forty or more persons whom he had found rather distasteful to him offered the plea that he could not possibly be guilty of such copious slaughter because any man, however sinful, would naturally have become tired of the business before he had negotiated the dispatch of even so few as twenty. Impelled by a similar ennui, I am happy to relinquish the assassination of some such second-rate show as, say, *Flahooley*, to those of my colleagues, younger in years, to whom the pleasures of indiscriminate critical blood-letting have not yet become tediously repetitive and enervating, and to take what little amusement it offers to innocent heart.

Most of our musical shows in the late 40's and early 50's have been founded on the belief that a stale novel or play may be converted into capital entertainment merely by adding some mediocre tunes to it, incorporating some vaudeville jokes

and a dozen or so dancing girls of a rather petrifying brand of looks, and having the scenery painted by someone who thinks a sense of gayety is best to be accomplished by smearing the canvases with all the colors in the pot. In such a situation even an exhibit like this *Flahooley* is a relief on at least one score, and that score is originality, or what goes for it in a theatre that esteems as the height of freshness ballets in which the women wear overalls in place of tarlatan and street scenes which do not include a tap dance. Shows about toys, true enough, have been familiar to our stage from the far ago years of *The Magic Doll* through those of *Babes In Toyland* and upwards. But while *Flahooley* is also about toys, and about a doll in particular, it isn't imitative and I find myself entertained by it, child at heart that I am, says he. I am entertained by it at any rate for half its distance, at which point the authors run out of imagination and, except for a scene in which a genie out of a magic lamp brings the Springtime back into a bleak world and sings and dances his way into the reborn laughter of the doll come to life (very well, let it pass), the show toboggans down hill.

It is this over-all, relative novelty that atones in my case for the inevitable commonplace tunes and for the scarifying aspect of the chorus girls. The scene, for example, in which the pompous boss of the toy factory abruptly dismisses an important meeting of the board of directors in order to play with a toy electric train strikes my simple mind as worth all the scenes in other shows in which a lack of humor is supposed to become hilarious simply because the backdrop represents Paris. The scenes, further, in which marionettes are engaged in conversation by living characters as if they too were human is similarly more appealing to me, innocent that I am, than the usual scenes in other exhibits in which unacknowledged dummies are offered as real people but conduct themselves as the puppets they essentially are. And the scene in which the genie's

wholesale production of laughing dolls, designed to bring happiness to a worried nation, is soberly condemned as impracticable, tickles me a deal more than the ones in other shows in which a chorus of homosexuals in chaps and sombreros make muscles and squeak about the glories of Texas or in which the impoverished young hero, who hasn't eaten for a week, haughtily spurns the suit of the young heroine because she has insulted his manly pride by trying to lend him a dollar.

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The lack of humor in most of the later day musicals seems to be the especial target of the critics. I do not wish to be a heretic, but recollection tells me that very, very few of the best musical comedies in my almost half-century of professional theatregoing and very, very few of those that have given me happy evenings have overwhelmed me with any notable jocosity. And I think that, if they will stop a moment to reflect, the colleagues will find the same thing true of themselves. I have laughed as loudly and heartily as any of them at farces, revues, burlesque shows and the sort, but I can not remember a single musical comedy of any real quality that had anything even remotely approaching that kind of laughter anywhere in it. So, if a show is palatable otherwise, I am no more distressed by its paucity of humor than I miss in any musical show what the critical brethren call intelligence. If I want intelligence, I stay at home.

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It is sufficiently known to almost everybody that, however widely you may have traveled, if there happens to be one place you have never been someone is certain to pop up and insist to you, with an expression of pained surprise, that he simply can not understand why you didn't go there, since you have missed experiencing something or other really wonderful

and the like of which is not to be had anywhere else in the world. The inexperienced locality may be anywhere from Indo-China to Pottstown, Pa., and the inexperienced something may be anything from a scenic view to a restaurant or from a species of alcoholic drink to girls and beyond, but whatever it is it seems to take on in the ecstasy of your informant a nigh miraculous lustre. If you foolishly risk the reply that in your extensive travels you have seen some pretty fabulous things yourself, you are done for, since the fellow will airily dismiss them as nothing and will set forth anew with such testimonials to his own discovery as will abash and humiliate you beyond repair.

I have in my long day seen a lot of the world, but one place I have never been is Bali and if you have never been in Bali you are the especial butt of the fellow's incredulity, astonishment and disdain. Everyone, it begins to appear, has been in Bali but me, at least to hear them tell it. And everyone has now been assuring me for what seems endless years that to have missed Balinese dancing is to have missed the most extraordinary demonstration of the terpsichorean art ever beheld on the face of the globe. What unsurpassed grace! what delicious beauty! what rare nuance and delicacy! what everything else! they are wont to exclaim, the meanwhile vouchsafing my ignorance a pitying glare. To them, the enviable initiates, I have been a desolate worm, unfit for acceptance in any truly cultured society. But no more. By a combined act of Providence and of a Mr. Schang of an outfit called the Columbia Artists Management a troupe of Balinese dancers was not long ago installed just around the corner on Forty-sixth street in the Fulton Theatre and, without so much as having to go out and buy a new toothbrush or packing a bag, I was enabled to complete my erstwhile defective education.

The big occasion was preceded by an exercise in ballyhoo that matched in lushness the delirium of my earlier mentors.

Such phrases as "utmost lyricism," "classic elegance," "amazing sophistication," "thrillingly hair-raising" and the sort were scattered abroad like demented confetti and when I entered the theatre I accordingly felt as if I were on the threshold of a shrine and should take my shoes off. But, controlling my humility as best I could, I fumbled my way to my seat and, awe-struck, there awaited the curtain's rise and the Revelation.

Let me say at once, probably confounding a surmise that after any such whimsical preamble it is obvious I would derogate the show, that the spectacle was an often fascinating one, that it contained now and again some real loveliness, and that it constituted in the aggregate, despite its over-extension, a contribution to the dance theatre that was not to be passed over by the intelligently curious. Without entering into a discussion of the technical aspects of the performance—a matter in which my critical equipment is not particularly luxuriant—I may say that the proceedings nevertheless struck me, with certain qualifications, as one of the most hypnotic exhibitions of exotic dance I have encountered. The qualifications remarked were mainly those predicated on monotony. While taking nothing from the unusual grace of the dancers, the single pattern of that grace, especially in the case of the females—one of whom, the youngster Ni Gusti Raka, was not only beautifully gifted in her peculiar art but as cute as a button—operated toward a measure of tedium. It seemed that, whatever the emotion, humor, thought, nature of the story or anything else, the interpretation of it was registered in almost exactly the same fashion. If it was the tremors of an amorously pursued and alarmed bumblebee that occupied the dancer, they were illustrated by precisely the same knee-bends, swaying torso, snaky arm movements, fluttering hands, sidewise jerks of the neck and upturnings of the toes as illustrated the machinations of a nymph against a great warrior and her ignominous defeat. Things as the evening went on thus gave the

impression of travestyng themselves, which was not good.

One of the most acceptable and appealing aspects of the show was the good taste of its sponsors in not horning into it the usual sex business arbitrarily incorporated into the performances of imported exotic dance groups in the hope of steaming up the box-office. Whatever the dances may be in their original native form, it has long been the wile of the importers either sensationally to exaggerate what sexual elements they may have had or to add to them such a pornographic movement and atmosphere as would bring old Grandfather Minsky protesting out of his sarcophagus. We consequently have had African, Haitian and other groups so locally showmanshipned into magnifications of the sexual aspects of their original performances that their own mothers and fathers back home in the jungle would probably disown them if they saw them. Though Balinese dancing lays no emphasis upon sex and in fact largely discounts it, at least in the Western view of what constitutes sexual display, no such nonsensical effort, as noted, was indulged in by the importing impresarios, and the result was not only a welcome theatrical novelty but a testimonial to their sense and artistic honesty. The exhibition, handsomely placed in a temple courtyard set by Richard Senie and handsomely lighted by him, impressively costumed by natives of the Singapadu and Pliatan villages of Bali and presided over musically by a Gamelan orchestra of twenty-three performers on drums, xylophones, cymbals, gongs and bamboo flutes, may scarcely have been all that the prefatory raptures had led one to imagine, but it nonetheless was something thoroughly worth seeing, particularly by those who do not venerate the Rockettes as the epitome of the dance art and an Agnes de Mille music show ballet as the last word in terpsichorean glory.

The costumes in any show about the Irish are customarily so unrelievedly green that by the time it ends you are left with the impression that you have been spending the evening with a dogmatic oculist in a billiard parlor.

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It is often written that, if the actors in a show appear to be enjoying themselves, the enjoyment is bound to be contagious and the audience will share it. This is one of the biggest pieces of nonsense among all the many nonsensical theatrical beliefs. The players in many shows seem to be having such a good time with themselves that, were the belief true, I, as one member of the audience, should rightly be unable to contain my mirth and should roll in the aisle howling with glee. I may, to be sure, be a bit eccentric, but I somehow am not affected as I am supposed to be. As I see it, it is my prerogative, as it is an audience's, that a show entertain me rather than its actors. I do not go to the theatre to see actors amusing themselves; I go, like anyone else, to have the actors amuse me.

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The Broadway advent of the Yiddish-English revue created something of a stir in at least one direction. The management of one, *Bagels And Yox*, announced that it would provide free bagels and lox to the first-night audience and the management of a second, *Borscht Capades*, announced in turn that the première customers would be supplied free borscht with sour cream. This was hailed as a theatrical innovation and, so far as bagels, lox and borscht goes, I suppose it was. But the idea of handing out foodstuffs gratis to audiences is as old as Tony Pastor, who on occasion dispensed to his customers not only sandwiches and soda pop but, when the occasion in his estimation was a particularly gala one, mustard with the sandwiches, to say nothing of dill pickles. When Willard Spenser's *Princess*

*Bonnie* opened at the old Broad Street Theatre in Philadelphia some fifty years ago, boxes of delicious cookies were distributed among the audience and when, years later, Winthrop Ames managed the Little Theatre here in New York it was his gesture to serve free coffee and cakes during the intermissions. Since this is not a food department, I will not extend the list, but I assure you that the dispensations have included tea, bonbons, lemonade, ice cream (with nuts), consommé and, as the Widow Cliquot is our judge, even, at the opening of Billy Rose's *The Seven Lively Arts*, vintage champagne.

## CRITICS AND REVIEWERS

WITH the advent of any theatrical season it is possible to offer a parcel of predictions that may be turned back to for substantiation by the reader during the year's course, whether to his distress or amusement.

First, the matter of acting. If the records of the past seasons count for anything, the already dazed fellow will again be driven out of his head trying to make head or tail of the reviewers' conflicting estimates of the talents of many of the players, both male and female. He will be told in some quarters that an actor or actress is little short of a superb genius and in some others that the same actor or actress is proportionally short of a rank incompetent. To say that this will puzzle him is to waste a sentence. By way of easing his perplexity, at least to a degree, I venture a few confidences on the subject.

Dismissing as too obvious the fact that while difference of opinion may make horse races it does not necessarily make sense, we inquire into the reasons for this particular difference in respect to the genus actor. Inability to distinguish between a pleasing performance and what is authentic acting is, of course, the root of the matter. An actor or actress by virtue of an attractive personality, physical suitability to a role and similar superficial attributes may confuse some critics into mistaking for exceptional talent what is merely accident of casting. That any real acting has small connection with the performance has frequently been proved by the subsequent failure of the player in a role or roles not so closely associated with his or her natural endowments. It was thus that Maude

Adams made a substantial impression on the critics of her day when she first appeared in what was largely a succession of roles calling for little more than a performance of personality and that her limitations became sharply clear when subsequently she was cast in parts that depended upon something considerably more than just personal wistfulness, an appealing voice, a sensitive face, and pretty reddish hair. And it is the same today with a much lesser figure like Celeste Holm who has managed cordial notices when she has been cast in the kind of pert, light comedy to which her person seems naturally suited but who has betrayed completely her lack of any true acting resources when she has essayed a role like Anna Christie, which she has played in exactly the same depthless manner as she has her comedy parts.

This is not, as may possibly be thought, a question of versatility. Versatility has little or nothing to do with the matter; it remains simply and fundamentally a question of the craft of acting. I have in my long years of reviewing seen many young actors and particularly actresses who have been acclaimed by the critics as exceptional on the score of the performance of a role that fitted them, as the phrase goes, like a glove and who thereafter have gone down the drain. They were simply victims of themselves: players who, like a rookie baseball player knocking out a home run the first time at bat and then fathomed by the pitchers and endlessly hitless, have hitched onto the single dramatic pitch within their competence and who thenceforth could not solve the curves and knuckleballs of professional acting. Yet quite a number of critics who should know better, having once committed themselves to the belief that the players in question were highly accomplished artists rather than merely transiently effective performers with a lucky break, have professed subsequently to see in them acting virtues scarcely visible to the less clouded critical eye.

Prejudice in favor of an actor or, more often, actress of course plays its part. Even the best of critics can not entirely

rid himself of such partiality, as witness the case of Bernard Shaw. For a critic despite his efforts at impartiality has to compete with the man that God for better or worse made him and the attraction he feels for some woman who happens to be an actress sometimes, alas, befuddles his judgment. It has long been that way, as any follower of the critical prints has had no trouble in detecting, and it will probably continue to be that way until the day when criticism is written by impersonal robots. Criticism may be criticism but human nature is human nature and when the one meets the other in such instances there comes the tug-of-war, with human nature often pulling criticism off its feet and landing it haplessly on its bottom.

There is, as well, loyalty to a player regardless of the quality of his or her performances. This, as is well known, has reached its height in England where, once a player has established himself or herself in a critic's affections, nothing can make the critic believe that the pet isn't always one to be venerated. Thus, for example, writes Ivor Brown: "This is sombre Rattigan, but it is also superb Peggy Ashcroft; no play in which she is suicidally playing with a gas-jet could fail to ignite a flame of genuine tragedy." (Miss Ashcroft has given some very able performances, but if she could manage to ignite a flame of genuine tragedy in some such suicidal gas-jet play as was unloaded from time to time upon the stage in the earlier years of the present century I should like to be present to behold the miracle.) Mr. Brown then goes on: "While Miss Ashcroft is on vacation, Celia Johnson will take over the lady's sadly unsatisfied death-wish and she too can be relied upon for a grand performance on the heart-strings." (I have duly admired Miss Johnson's performance in several plays, but just how, apart from blind loyalty, can Mr. Brown know that her performance as a successor to Miss Ashcroft is bound to be a grand one?)

Criticism of actors as we currently get it must often be read

with one's fingers crossed. It will therefore be sagacious of the reader during any season if he curls his index finger over his thumb, and keeps it fixed there.

The record further indicates that the reader will continue to have a time of it making any sense out of the critics' contradictory opinions on the merits and demerits of stage direction and will wind up wondering if any two of them have seen the identical play or are talking about a pair of totally different exhibits. As in the case of the acting, he will read here and there that the direction is excellent and there and here that the director should go back to his old job carrying a spear or operating a barn theatre in the tall grass. There are, of course, critics who know their business when discussing stage direction, but there are many more who seem to believe that any man able to manipulate a revolving stage in such wise that not more than two of the actors will fall off it and break their legs is not too far behind Stanislavski and that if he can at the same time keep the scenery from tumbling down and burying the two victims under it he is not only the equal of the celebrated Russian but his superior.

This charming naïveté is accountable for the reader's discomposure on several counts. There are critics, for example, who imagine that good direction consists solely in sustaining the stage movement, seeing to it that the lighting is proper, and getting the actors to speak clearly. There are others who think that a mere avoidance of clichés marks a director as an exceptional fellow, and still others who view originality and novelty, however forced and controvertible, as a token of directorial genius. There are, however, fewer who appreciate that expert direction begins with the script itself before even the actors are hired, that casting is an important part of that direction, that the settings figure in it as well, that the dress of the players also does, that save in rare instances the theatrical editing of the playwright's dramatic corpus is of direction's essence, and that, first and foremost, it is the purpose of the

director to create a show, not in the vulgar box-office sense but in the intelligent best, out of what the dramatist, however sacrosanct, has written. Says Maugham: "Nowadays when a play is badly constructed, when its people act without rhyme or reason, and when loose ends are left lying about all over the place, we sit up and say it has atmosphere." In much the same way, when nowadays direction is simply eccentric, when it causes the actors to act with some rhyme but little reason, and when loose ends are left lying about all over the stage on the theory that things thus approach more closely to the untidiness of life, the critics sit up and say the direction has imaginative fluidity.

"Poetry," Carl Sandburg remarks, "is when you can make a fine clock and have a laugh at yourself for not taking a contract to make a sun or moon to tell time by." Direction in this respect is rather like poetry.

Another look at the record presages a continuance of some other foibles of local criticism. One of these is a tendency to regard a play as important, or at least comparatively so, if the theme with which it deals is an important one. We saw the tendency in exercise for the uncountable time in the case, for example, of Maxwell Anderson's *Barefoot In Athens* which, simply because it had to do with Socrates' advocacy of free inquiry in a democratic society, was, though the play was a poor one, esteemed in certain quarters as a work of considerable consequence. Some of the best plays of modern times have dealt with themes far from bulky in importance; some of the very worst with themes definitely important as the world regards importance. Yet much of current criticism remains and doubtless will remain impervious to the matter of artistic treatment and venerative instead of mere subject matter. The reader of criticism will accordingly at times be cozened into laying out his money for so-called important drama whose only importance will consist in the wisdom of someone other than the dramatist, whose sole independent contribution will con-

sist in turn in embodying the borrowed wisdom in the flatness and dulness of his own writing.

Another of the foibles is and will be the seeming critical conviction that no imported French play is ever translated into English with sufficient adroitness and understanding and that as a consequence the flavor of the original must inevitably be lost. Passing over the point that some of these French plays are not particularly blessed with the flavor even in the original, the idea that the translations are always defective fails to hold up under scrutiny. It is perfectly true that every now and then we get a French play, especially a comedy, that has been botched by poor translation and doubly so by the process known as adaptation, but some translations are nevertheless found to be both apt and intelligent. Such as those of Guitry's *Pasteur* and Bourdet's *The Captive*, to name but two, were admirable; and do not forget that the one of *The Rubicon* some years ago was so exact that the police raided it. The trouble lies not so much with the translations as with the adaptations, which are often so arbitrary and silly that if the original author saw the play he would, if he didn't feel the advance royalty on it in his trouser pocket, be convinced that it had been written by one of his Paris playwriting rivals, whose work it is his usual whim to regard as *peine forte et dure* or, in other words, verree lousee. So again each season will witness one or more of these adaptations that will adapt most of the juice out of the play and cause those critics whose knowledge of French is confined to vichysoise, pari mutuel and oolala to disparage its poor, helpless author and to wonder with a superior air about the taste and intelligence of French audiences.

A third caprice is and will continue to be an exaggerated esteem of English actors on the score of the purity of their articulation and diction. There is no question that many English actors enjoy the purity but that it is general among them is another matter. Quite as many of them garble human speech as badly as an equal number of American actors. It is simply

that the British manner of inflection seems to be snobbishly effective on the local ear and that the garbling is somehow accepted as the fashionable thing. Furthermore, while clear speech is surely a valuable asset, it in itself is no more a guarantee of acting merit than a mere graceful bearing or an attractive person. Some very bad actors not only in England but in America have possessed admirably clear speaking voices and some very good ones in both countries have not.

Finally, a fourth foible. This has to do with relative values and goes into critical operation, to the bamboozling of the theatre customer, after a succession of worthless plays. After three or four such have been duly derogated by the reviewers, a kind of charity, or perhaps just the feeling that too much griddling will be tiresome to their readers, overcomes them and when a fifth and little better play comes along they will either let it down or lay emphasis on its purely comparative virtues, which will lead the casual reader to believe that it must be a pretty savory dish. *Caveat emptor!* While charity may very well begin at home, it should not be carried over into the theatre by any critic with self-respect and with some honor left under his shirt. He should bear in mind that every time he swindles a reader, he swindles the best interests of the theatre as well.

## II

In the years when I was editing magazines there were three kinds of contributions in particular that were marked for rejection slips by the time I had read the first sentence. They were the kind that started: "Has the church failed?" "Though it may be open to contradiction," and "The trouble with something-or-other is." So, if I begin these paragraphs with the trouble with the theatre, I can not much blame you if you stop reading immediately. However, on the off-chance that you may

conceivably be slightly curious to learn what I will do with the moth-eaten topic, I'll proceed. In order to keep you from despairing nonetheless, I may say at once that I shall not enter again into such matters as the prohibitive costs of production, the exorbitant demands of the labor unions, the acute shortage of good play scripts, the threat of television, the high price of tickets, and all the overly familiar rest. Except for the doubtful threat of television, everyone knows the damage such things have already wrought. But there is something else overlooked that is troubling the theatre just as greatly, and it is that something else I here bring to your attention, if I still have have it.

It is the attitude of many of the daily newspaper reviewers, not only in New York but in the other important cities. With some obvious and honorable exceptions in the metropolis and in these other cities, they seem perfectly willing, despite their occasional elevated protests to the contrary, to take the theatre as they presently find it, which dramatically is pretty much flat on its back. It isn't always that they do not know better; it is simply resignation to the existing state of affairs, combined with the feeling that the unpleasant truth if too regularly reported would be unacceptable to both their newspapers and their unthinking readers. The consequence, as their more observing followers fully appreciate, is that, as I have before noted, they often either make allowances for or praise inferior plays in the misguided notion that they are thus helping to keep the theatre going. It is true that they may keep it going by such chicanery, but they can not keep it going for long. You can mislead and cheat the public some of the time but not forever, and signs of the day of reckoning are already visible. If there are no good plays, the aforesaid reviewers appear to say to themselves, we must pretend that those that are not good are good; and the result is that the producers say to themselves in turn, why take a risk with really fine plays if we can safely get away with the kind of stuff we are doing.

If these reviewers cared to get the theatre back on a firm foundation, they would see the error of their ways and, by lambasting the feathers off such presently accepted turkeys, would soon scare the producers from doing them and make them at least consider a better grade of drama. But so long as they foolishly encourage the production of the third-rate they can not hope that the producers themselves will be so flighty as to dismiss it in favor of something of repute and quality.

That the public is becoming less and less charitable to rubbish and more and more demands the worth-while—and when it does not get it remains at home—is something the reviewers seem to forget. Though some of the snide things they endorse do a prosperous business (the public will always have its share of gulls), it should occur to them that the plays they are able to sanction in full honesty and which are actually deserving are those the public takes really to its bosom. For that public, whatever sarcasms one may hear lodged against it, seems to have the interests of the theatre a little closer to heart than the reviewers have. The future of the theatre, in short, is to be guaranteed not by praising it when it does not merit praise, but by hitting it on the chin time and again and without let-up until those who serve it are made to realize that they will have to alter their procedure or go bankrupt.

The attitude of the reviewers in point, as intimated, is however not altogether impossible to understand, regrettable though it be. By taking a lenient course they preserve their comfort with the newspapers that employ them, avoid possible embarrassing difficulties with complaining producers, enjoy personal advertising in quotations of their praises, and safeguard themselves from being charged with being too insistent growlers and faultfinders. Furthermore, they apologize to themselves and retain a measure of self-respect by arguing to themselves, when they write favorably of some trashy play, that "after all, it's simply intended as entertainment and makes

no pretence of being anything more." That the play entertains nobody, including themselves, they conveniently overlook. They just take the chance that some of their reading dupes may somehow find it amusing. And, finally, they console themselves that it is better to make friends than enemies, as if a friend worth having had to be lied to to become a friend. They do not stop to think in their contented selfishness nor do they care that the theatre is something much bigger and more important than they are and is worth their sincerest efforts. All they think about is the softness of their jobs and the bad luck it would be to lose them by telling what they fear may be the unwelcome and now and again offensive truth.

## APPENDIX

It is often complained that a critic of long experience must inevitably become jaded and have no taste for certain plays that a less experienced theatregoer might delight in. This is very much like arguing that a man whose palate is partial to first-rate food loses his relish for it after dining for a long stretch on the dog-wagon kind and that, conversely, people who have had very little to eat in their lives, if offered their choice between a juicy Porterhouse steak and a peanut butter sandwich, would not know the difference and would enjoy the latter quite as much as the former.

\* \* \*

In estimating an actor's importance it is the practice of many contemporary critics to take into statistical consideration his so-called versatility and to predicate his position on the variety of roles he has been able to play. By any such standard of appraisal and judgment, Salvini and Duse would be pretty far down near the end of the class.

\* \* \*

One of the most simple-minded practices of reviewers is their occasional extenuation of a foul play on the ground that the first-night audience appeared greatly to enjoy it. Merely because such an audience for one reason or another gives outward indication through handclapping and laughter, usually bogus, that it is having a good time no more accurately testi-

fies to its pleasure than the frequent equally polite and equally bogus "Pleased to meet you," "You're looking fine," and promiscuous handshaking of its extra-theatre life indicate any sincerity whatsoever.

\* \* \*

A critic will, of course, emphatically deny it, but the fact remains that a good-looking and personally appealing actress will always impress him as being a better actress than she actually may be.

\* \* \*

More critical bosh is ventilated about the difference between the written and the spoken word than about most subjects, which is a lot. The two, young and aspiring playwrights are advised, are as far apart as the poles and the difference must be duly appreciated if their plays are to get anywhere. There is no difference between the written and the spoken word that can not be reconciled by sufficiently able actors. Shaw's *Don Juan In Hell* was not, he once confessed, written to be spoken and is as good an example of the purely written word as one can think of. Yet four capable actors with four capable voices have converted it into one of the biggest theatrical and box-office successes of recent seasons.

\* \* \*

Edmund Wilson informed the press that his play, *The Little Blue Light*, was, because of the cuts the producers had made in it, "nonsensical." T. S. Eliot wrote that his play, *Murder In The Cathedral*, failed to solve any general problem, greatly overdid the choral interludes, and got nowhere "but a dead end"; that his *The Family Reunion* was full of defects, among them many dramatically unjustifiable passages; and that his *The Cocktail Party*, which so many people admired, had much less poetry in it than such people seemed to think.

If this keeps up, there will be no further need for dramatic critics.

\* \* \*

The professional moralist betrays himself by the very nature of his profession. Bereft of it, he would be a miserable man. He is what he is because smut, or what he chooses to regard as it, gratifies him no end. You will never find a sewer repairer whom the smell of sewage makes sick.

\* \* \*

To expect a dramatist to take an unpleasant subject and by some esoteric magic make it agreeably soothing is to demand of him that he be a charlatan. That job is not for artists, but for frauds. Yet some critics continue to demand it.

\* \* \*

The desire of everyone to be a free-tongued critic is most fully satisfied by baseball, which accounts for the enormous popularity of the sport. A theatre affords the privilege academically to only about a dozen professionals; a baseball game affords it not only to a similar handful of professionals but to thousands upon thousands of articulate amateurs. Small wonder the Yankee Stadium plays to more people in a single game than a theatre often does in a show's whole run, even if the game, like the show, is a disappointment. In fact, if it is a disappointment, the critics in the boxes, stands and bleachers have almost as good a time exercising their critical privilege as they have if it is a dandy.

\* \* \*

Scrutinizing the body of critical practice, one wart in particular stands out. Its most conspicuous blemish is not, as is often argued by critics of criticism, a low level of artistic judgment but frequently rather a low level of personal chemistry. We

have many critics whose opinions are honest, sound and convincing, but we have many more whose opinions, while perhaps equally honest and sound so far as they go, lack complete conviction because of an infiltration, which they can not conceal, of the essentially snide men they themselves are. A snide man may write intelligent criticism, but he can not write criticism that fully persuades others save intelligent men who are similarly snide. Out of some of the most interesting criticism being written today there issue traces of this personal snideness, and the impression one consequently gets of it is of a deodorant applied not so much to the subject it criticizes as to the half-sensed and sweatfully hidden shabbiness of the critic himself.

\* \* \*

Honesty of opinion is not unusual in critical writing. The weakness of much of the writing lies in its failure to combine the honesty of opinion with basically sound judgment.

\* \* \*

Two ladies, the Misses Jacqueline Berke and Vivian Wilson, recently published a book called *Watch Out For The Weather*, in which once again is dispensed the platitude that "you do your best mental work when the weather is cool and invigorating, and your worst in summer." The notion that cool weather is more cerebrally invigorating than warm to all people is one of the fallacies that seems never to die, yet the fact is that there are many who are infinitely more stimulated by warmth than chill. I myself am an example. On a warm day I feel fine and my head pops with all kinds of ideas. On a cold day, unless I turn on the heat or light the grate, I am uncomfortable and my discomfort debilitates my thinking apparatus. And at least three out of every five of my friends tell me it is the same with them. One may not feel like working in the hot weather, but that is a different matter and has nothing to do with the

incidental fruitful functioning of the brain. Even so, plenty of the best plays and novels are written during the warm months of the year. Cold is for Eskimos or professional outdoor health fiends who usually come down with arthritis, double pneumonia, heart ailments, or frozen ears, noses and feet before they are sixty. Warmth is for artists.

\* \* \*

It seems strange that among the scholarly critics who for years have burst their buttons at the Smith and Dale *Dr. Kronkite* sketch when Dale says he is dubious and Smith grasps his hand with a "pleased to meet you, Mr. Dubious" there was not one who, in reviewing a recent production of *Much Ado About Nothing*, caught the actor in the role of Dogberry trying to help out Shakespeare with a laugh by inserting a paraphrase of the gag and addressing Verges, whom Leonato has called tedious, as Mr. Tedious.

Not less strange is it that, when so many of the critics ridicule William Saroyan for his alleged juvenility and sentimentality in loving all humanity, they do not at the same time think to ridicule equally and in the same derisive terms Fyodor Dostoievski who in *The Brothers Karamazov*, which they revere as something of a classic, writes, "Love all God's creation, the whole and every grain of sand in it. Love every leaf, every ray of God's light. Love the animals, love the plants, love everything. If you love everything, you will perceive the divine mystery in things. Once you perceive it, you will begin to comprehend it better every day. And you will come at last to love the whole world with an all-embracing love." Compared with Dostoievski, Saroyan is a rank misanthrope.

And it is also peculiar that the left-wing playwrights, who are currently spreading their indignation in the public prints and protesting that you can not expect fine dramatists to emerge under the existing restrictions and repressions of free political utterance, somehow have not been told by the critics

to extend their reading to Chekhov who proclaimed, "Great writers and great artists must take part in politics only in so far as it is necessary to put up a defense against politics."

\* \* \*

The critical worth of a play reviewer may be determined in inverse ratio to the number of times he is quoted in the newspaper theatrical advertisements.

\* \* \*

It seems to be the conviction of some critics that only by affecting the rigidity of erect corpses may actors plausibly depict heroic resolve and indomitable pride.

\* \* \*

It is an embarrassing confession, but the fact remains that simply because a critic finds something to be undeniably good it does not necessarily follow that his personal interest will be greatly stimulated by it. Nor on the other hand does it inevitably follow that because he finds something far from good his personal reaction to it will be wholly uncomfortable. Even perfection, as Maugham said, can become pretty tiresome; he allowed he could get much more satisfaction from a glass of cold beer than from a too prolonged look at the Parthenon. And it is the same, sometimes, with plays, that is, plays which, if not perfect, at least approximate the demands of the more punditical critics. Just as baseball addicts know that, aside from the technical appreciation, there is much less excitement in a pitched no-hit game than in one in which the swatting is more luxuriant, so critics know in their secret hearts—though they would not for a moment admit it—that if they had to look at anything as similarly flawless as *Oedipus Rex* for nights on end without any relief from things as welcomely imperfect and negligible as, say, some of Maugham's own glasses of dramatic comedy beer they would go out of their minds.

There are occasional plays that distress critics by insisting

upon being amusing in spite of all the defects they intelligently find in them. Nothing, obviously, can be more humiliating. Analyze them and they should by rights be rather dreary affairs. But they somehow are not anything of the kind; they are a lot of fun and better entertainment than some plays which the reviewers consider, quite correctly, to be much freer from faults. It is all a little confusing, like an acknowledged confidence man whose ways are so ingratiating that one likes him in spite of himself. And it only goes to show once again that too much intelligence in a critic, while it may be meet for his reputation, can sometimes keep him, if he refuses for the time being to give in to himself, from enjoying himself.

\* \* \*

The appearance of Janis Paige, a Hollywood screen actress, in *Remains To Be Seen* brewed quite a rumpus among the colleagues, who entertained two violently opposed points of view as to the girl and her performance. One point of view, maintained not without considerable emphasis and impolite face-making, argued that she had no apparent talent and could not act worth a hoot. The other, with not less emphasis and a perfectly straight face, contended that she had considerable talent and that her performance was a very good one. Both schools of thought, with minor and negligible exceptions, agreed however that she had a sensationally elegant shape and a very whistleworthy pair of legs.

In view of the concession, in which I concur with even greater emphasis and a beaming countenance and in further view of the fact that the aforesaid shape and legs were placed on display in various degrees of nudity throughout the evening, I wish to take the independent and solo position of stating that it did not matter whether she could act or not. How much do the colleagues want for their money? Enough should be enough. If perchance they reply that criticism is criticism

and that shapes and legs have nothing to do with it, I in turn reply: Pooh. The play in which the plum appeared was trash and no more called for any acting worthy of the name than a vaudeville show or night club revue. In such a juncture her physical attributes provided a tonic and very welcome relief from the general doldrums. Let us forget for the moment histrionic talent, which would be irrelevant, and remember God's.

\* \* \*

In the reviews of Uta Hagen's performance of the title role in Shaw's *Saint Joan*, I observed that she was condemned by several of the critics on the ground that her interpretation of the peasant girl lacked an earthy quality and did not suggest the smell of the soil. It may not have been a satisfactory performance on other counts, but this particular criticism of it was, I believe, unfounded. In making it, the critics in question were haunted, it seems, by the established, legendary picture of the maid and did not gather Shaw's view of her, which here alone was apposite. Shaw clearly stipulates that she was not the usual stage conception of a peasant girl but that she came of relatively superior country stock, her father being the village's bigwig. In any village and in any of its peasant population there is often a young woman markedly different in body, person and manner from the popularly accepted, standard picture, as Shaw well knew. Du Barry was born in a village in Champagne not far from Joan's Lorraine. Mae West comes from Greenpoint.

\* \* \*

As matters stand with our theatre today, things are harder for the critic than for his readers, if that is possible. With new productions worth reviewing at a minimum, there remain only the revivals of such old reliables as Shakespeare, Shaw, Ibsen and O'Neill for him to write about and, since he already has often enough written of the plays, little is left for him to say

about them. Thus he has but two courses open to him: either to repeat in one form or another what he has said before, which would be drugging the market, since his clients are all too familiar with it, or to devote himself to a consideration of the acting performances alone, something that interests American readers infinitely less than it does the English, whose steadfast devotion to their players at the expense of drama resembles that of our lesser countrymen to their moving picture idols at the expense of any intelligence whatsoever.

It is not, certainly, that criticism of acting hasn't its fully relevant place in appraisals of the theatre. The point I try to suggest is that it is immensely difficult to make it attractive to the lay reader who, as noted, is not particularly concerned with it, that is, beyond knowing simply whether the actors in a play are good or bad, how they look, what kind of clothes or dresses they wear, and if they can be heard back of the eleventh row, where the reader is usually doomed to sit.

\* \* \*

Criticism is the deliberated distillation from mere opinion of those elements in it that may possibly be sound and the expression of them in language which intimates that the critic thought of them in the first place.

\* \* \*

All first-rate criticism is a reflection of the man the critic himself is. Second-rate criticism is a reflection of the man the critic hopelessly aspires to be.

\* \* \*

No chronically happy man is a trustworthy critic.

\* \* \*

Play reviewing approaches drama criticism only in the degree that the reviewer thinks with his ears and de-emotionalizes his eyes.

\* \* \*

All true art is a vindication of artificiality.

\* \* \*

*Love's Labour's Lost*, one of Shakespeare's earliest plays, had not been done in New York since 1891 until the City Center Drama Company put it on for a two weeks' engagement. I did not see the earlier production, since at the time the Bard occupied a much lesser part of my life and interest than playing Indian in the family's back-yard and trying to escape a spanking for indenting an interfering maid's hind anatomy with an arrow. But I did see a production of the play in England quite a few years later, a conventional production in the orthodox Shakespearean manner, and I wish to say that, despite the indignation of some of the reviewers at the liberties taken in this latest one, it had for me all the delight the other and straighter did not.

That the play is one of Shakespeare's poorest is well enough known, and that it needs all kinds of production and acting fillips to make it tolerable in these days should be equally recognized, even by reviewers. But so greatly, it appears, are some of them still committed to the doctrine of Shakespeare inviolability that Albert Marre's intelligent impertinence sorely offended them. This talented Cambridge, Mass., Brattle Theatre young man, dismissing Shaw's facetious "If it is by a good author, it is a good play," took hold of the script, which was written for a court revel and plot-wise is not much more than minor W. S. Gilbert relieved only seldom by singing lyrical line and wit and consisting mainly in the most primitive forms of humor, and by the exercise of a tipsy theatrical imagination converted it, at least in considerable part, into an attractive and amusing show, which it assuredly was not in any such production as I saw abroad and as it certainly no longer seems to indicate in a reading of it. Setting the scene in the Edwardian era, he did, it must be admitted, occasionally stretch things pretty far, but I am not sure that the stretching

was not as necessary to inject vivacity into what otherwise might expire as the stretching of a dry elastic is necessary to keep it from cracking apart.

Marre's avoidance or at least minimizing of the accepted classical acting style and classical reading of the Shakespeare line, sternly protested by a number of the reviewers, was also to his credit, since, as the reviewers in question seem to have overlooked, much of the play does not, save traditionally and unwarrantedly, call for any such acting and reading. Both, except at two or three points, are better forgotten. His main faults were, first, a too frequent, painful slowness in the actor's picking up cues; second, a here and there sophomoric audacity in being novel for mere novelty's sake; and, third, a periodic recourse to some of the more obvious business of decayed vaudeville. But the show over-all was a good one, even if the aforesaid reviewers found it incumbent upon them still to remain true to what they were taught in school and so kept themselves from giving in to it and having a good time.

\* \* \*

I am sometimes criticized for leaving a theatre after the first act of a particularly verminous play, the theory of the objectors being that the particularly verminous play might improve as it went along, an hypothesis established by experience to be as questionable as the belief that if one does not do anything about a serious case of pneumonia it will gradually disappear and end up as only a cold. The late James Agate, critic for the London *Sunday Times* and a sagacious man, proved me an amateur for hanging around in such circumstances as long as I customarily do. It was his intelligence to leave after the first line of dialogue.

\* \* \*

It is also said of me that I now and then contradict myself. Yes, I improve wonderfully as time goes on.

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